

The Origin Project

The Origin Project Series

Book 1: 2015 Student Anthology

Book 2: 2016 Student Anthology

Book 3: 2017 Student Anthology

Book4: 2018 Student Anthology

Book 5: 2019 Student Anthology

Book 6: 2020 Student Anthology

Book 7: 2021 Student Anthology

Book 8: 2022 Student Anthology

Book 9: 2023 Student Anthology

Book 10: Roots, Wings & Recipes

Book 11: 2025 Student Anthology

Book 12: 2026 Student Anthology

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The Origin Project

An anthology of student poetry,
prose and essays

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Welcome from Adriana Trigiani

President and Co-Founder, The Origin Project

The Origin Project is an in-school writing program that began fourteen years ago with forty students in Big Stone Gap, Virginia and, since its inception, has grown to serve over 25,000 students across the state. For fourteen years, we have encouraged students to share their unique origin stories through the art of writing, and we are honored to publish them in our twelfth anthology. You will be moved by the work of these students—from stories of fictional worlds to poetry about their families to essays about coming of age—the work is diverse, thoughtful and brilliant.

Our participating students are given a journal at the start of the school year to put their ideas to paper. The students write one article, essay, poem, play or interview during the school year, using their origins as the prompt. Their work is gathered, reviewed and published at the end of the school year by the Gupta Foundation.

A key tenant of the Origin Project is gathering in assembly. We would like to thank our generous donors for believing in our mission. Because of your support, we are able to provide our students with engaging programs and necessary resources throughout the school year. An incredible lineup of guest authors joined us during the 2025-2026 school year, and students at our events received copies of books from every single author. Your donations go directly to our students and the programming that keeps our organization alive.

This school year, the Origin Project gathered for events across the Commonwealth. In the fall of 2025, students came together at the Library of Virginia in Richmond for our Fall Literary Festival. The Newbery Award-winning author Kate DiCamillo (*The Tale of Despereaux*, *Flora & Ulysses*, *Because of Winn-Dixie*) was our keynote speaker. Finalists for the Library of Virginia Literary Awards, Remica Bingham-Risher (*Room Swept Home*), Carter Higgins (*Round and Round the Year We Go*) and JoAnna Lapati (*Guts for Glory*), led various writing workshops. We met again in December for the Festival of Trees at the Southwest Virginia Museum in Big Stone Gap, Virginia. Here, students could write about the exhibit and their own holiday traditions. Local author Kathy McElyea read her short story, *When An Old Dog Prays*, enchanting our students.

In the spring of 2026, our friends at Emory & Henry University welcomed us for our Spring Literary Festival. Kate DiCamillo visited our students, once again, for a virtual keynote. Bestselling cookbook author Jimmy Proffitt (*Seasoned in Appalachia*) brought our cuisine and storytelling to the students. An essential part of our mission is to bring students, teachers and artists together in conversation. We are grateful for our friends and supporters who sponsor our guest artists and assemblies.

This school year, we also introduced friendly competition, with prizes awarded to the students who submitted their work. Congratulations Dryden Elementary School, Unity Reed High School, Appomattox Regional Governor's School for Art & Technology, and Greendale Elementary School for being the first classes to turn in your Anthology submissions. The classes were awarded with pizza parties for completing their writing ahead of our publication schedule.

As the program grows, we find new ways to serve our students.

We are proud to introduce the first-ever scholarship competition this school year in memory of our co-founder and director Nancy Bolmeier-Fisher. Nancy was the heart and soul of the Origin Project who believed that writing was the basis for every endeavor and a mastery of it and connection to the craft could change the world one story at a time. The Nancy Bolmeier-Fisher (NBF) Scholarship aims to support the winning student and their future endeavors. A selection of our Origin Project seniors opted for their Anthology submissions to be considered for the NBF Scholarship. We are happy to congratulate the 2025 - 2026 winners.

First Place: *Everyday Calls* by Aubrey Malle, Lee High School

Second Place: *Green* by Isabella Lyons, Appomattox Regional Governor's School

Third Place: *Barbie* by Danika Doyle, Governor's School of Southside Virginia

This anthology would not have been published without the teachers, administrators, community members, donors, and friends who participated and uplifted our students. Thank you!

Our team is hardworking, amazing and dedicated. Our gratitude to our Executive Director, Linda Woodward, and to our editor and publisher, Carmen Bauman. We thank Andrea Rillo and Lucia Stephenson for their superb editorship of this book.

Thank you and congratulations, students! We thank your parents, grandparents and guardians for embracing the program. Every year, we read your submissions, and every year we are amazed by your work. You are the voices of the moment and the future. You have exhibited emotion, talent and resolve on the page. We are proud of you!

We are so excited for all that lies ahead for you. We hope that writing, creating and connecting through your experience with the Origin Project has given you the tools to write your way forward. We can't wait for your next chapter.



Fall 2025 TOP Literary Festival,
Library of Virginia



Fall 2025 TOP Literary Festival, Library
of Virginia with author Kate DiCamillo



Cupcakes by Billy Bryan for students attending
Fall 2025 TOP Literary Festival, Library of
Virginia



Fall 2025 TOP Literary Festival,
Library of Virginia with author Remica
Bingham-Risher



Fall 2025 TOP Literary Festival, Library of Virginia
with author Carter Higgins



Fall 2025 TOP Literary Festival, Library of
Virginia with author JoAnna Lapati

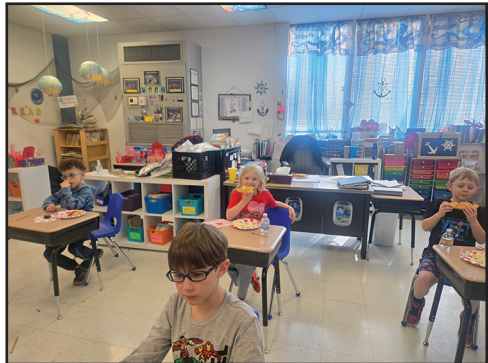
Greendale students share Thank You sign for The Origin Project



Greendale students enjoy pizza party for early Book 12 submissions



Dryden students enjoy pizza party for early Book 12 submissions



Dryden students enjoy pizza party for early Book 12 submissions

TOP Students at Southwest Virginia
Historical Museum & State Park
Festival of Trees



TOP Students at Southwest Virginia Historical Museum &
State Park Festival of Trees



TOP Students at Southwest
Virginia Historical Museum & State
Park Festival of Trees



TOP Students at Southwest Virginia Historical Museum & State Park Festival of Trees

TOP Students at Southwest Virginia Historical Museum & State Park Festival of Trees





Spring 2026 TOP Literary Festival, Emory & Henry University with Co-Founder and President Adriana Trigiani



Spring 2026 TOP Literary Festival, Emory & Henry University with author Kate DiCamillo



Spring 2026 TOP Literary Festival, Emory & Henry University with First-Ever TOP Nancy Bolmeier Fisher Scholarship winner, Aubrey Malle, with Adriana Trigiani



Spring 2026 TOP Literary Festival, Emory & Henry University with author Jimmy Proffitt



Spring 2026 TOP Literary Festival, Emory & Henry University with Executive Director Linda Woodward

Appomattox Regional Governor's School for the Arts & Technology

Petersburg, Virginia

*Gail Giewont,
Literary Arts Department Chair*

Three Streets Away

Three streets away
Down old roads
Past gardens and lawns
The home I never quite left
The home we lent to strangers
The home they changed and made their own.
Barely over a quarter mile yet it feels distant as stars.
I'll never be in that home again,
Not the one I knew.
It would be a stage waiting for the crew to decorate it.
It won't be the home where my height is recorded on the walls
Where scribbles aren't carved into the wooden rails of the stairway
Where piles of junk are stored in the basement
Where random old toys and playthings spill from my bedroom closet.
That place, that sensation, like a bead on a necklace of experience
Fallen away, rolled just out of reach
Inconspicuous on first glance and not hard to forget at times
Yet painstakingly obvious after an extra second's glance.
Maybe I'll feel the same once I leave this new home
Or maybe I'll be glad to abandon this hollow replacement
As of now, I believe I could forget this new home,
Quite easily in fact
Though I don't believe I could ever forget the home that's seen most all my years
Three Streets Away.

DREW BONNER, GRADE 9

Little Black Girl Blues

Oh, I'm so sorry that you were born the "ugly way".
One a lot different from the pretty blonde girls on T.V.
I'm so sorry that you were born the ugly way,
plus that those thoughts ever once through your head.
And that color, the one you hate so desperately,
Never truly seemed to fade away.

Yeah, you can burn your hair to the fiery pits and back,
that won't change the way the roots grow. No way,
you can burn your hair to the fiery pits and back,
but that won't ever change the way the roots grow.
Hide it, brush it, perm it til' your scalp scabs over,
doesn't matter, the monster will grow back. Say,

if I teach you to love the heaping naps of you head,
will you soon learn to hate all the fat on your lips?
When I teach you to love the heaping naps of you head,
will you soon learn to hate the width of your nose and hips?
You know there isn't enough love in the world
to make up for the hate you got dwelling in your heart

Oh, I'm so sorry that you were born that way, my dear.
The way filled that filled your tiny brain with such resentment,
the one that is convinced to be ashamed to be seen.
Your eyes betray you, poisoned by nasty waves from you brain
but, as long as you refuse to accept the way you were born
that will never change, I fear.

JOSLYN BROWN, GRADE II

To All the Girls I've Been

When I sleep I dream of poems, of otherworldly
images in which I am a painter
and my dream-filled brain is the canvas.
My brush becomes my pen,
the paintings my words and I am everything
and nothing at the same time,
shining and falling until I sprout wings, flying
like a seagull with a fresh-caught fish
off the shore of Cape Cod
or maybe I'm nine,
scared to hit double-digits and move
out of the pond-water green farmhouse in Vermont,
or maybe it's me again—fifty and happy
and looking back on the girl writing this
with a serene smile because “everything
worked out alright in the end.” But maybe
that's too cliché and maybe
I was never meant to paint with words,
not a swan, seagull or any winged creature;
just a broken ballerina, a girl
who's body will fail her again and again.
Maybe I'm stuck in time,
twelve—red-faced and embarrassed
as the judges tell me my face isn't expressive
enough for a better role in the Nutcracker.
Still caught in this loop,
I'm now thirteen and undeveloped
sitting in the car outside Richmond Ballet
begging my mother not to make me go inside and

the disappointment in her eyes is familiar.
It's January and seventeen-year-old me
faces a lecture from my aunt who's crying.
She says she doesn't know who I am
anymore.

ZORA CASTELLANO, GRADE 12

Love, Trinkets, And Blackberry Pie

Warning: Mature Content

I pulled a steaming hot blackberry pie from the oven, its old door creaking angrily in a protest of being opened. I held the pie in my hands for a bit, savoring the nice warm temperature radiating from the chipped porcelain through the triple layered oven mitts that mom had knitted for us a few years back, until I could feel the gloves begin to become uncomfortably hot.

With that, I unhinged the kitchen's outdoor window overlooking our backyard and set the pie in it. "It's frigid out there child, whatever could you be doing?" My aunt Mag exclaimed, poking her head in from the washroom, where she was handwashing my kid sister's clothing for the new year.

"The pie needs to cool, and as much as I dislike the chill, it's also getting excessively stuffy in here," I replied, pulling the window curtains closed to fight off a bit of the mid-December winds. This winter had been colder than usual, and mom claimed it was from the new city the people were building a few hundred kilometers away. They had leveled the woods, making a flat plain that the winds could easily glide along.

I walked out of the kitchen and over to the fireplace to warm myself up. Mom was fast asleep in her worn old rocking chair, the maroon one made of wood I'd forgotten to mend after doing my morning chores, she had purple yarn strewn about the living room, and the kitten, Lawn Meower, was having the time of his life playing with it. "Mabel, come get your cat before he chews through mom's yarn!"

I hear my sister's feet patter into the sitting room from the bedroom we shared in the back of the house. She quickly scooped up her cat, who decided her loosely braided curls were more important than the yarn. We got Lawn Meower when Mabel found him in the town fountain over the summer. He was a really little kitten, only about 11 weeks of age, and mother, rather reluctantly, allowed her to keep him. He was a pretty cat, I had to give him that; with his grass green eyes and cream, almost orange fur. He also had little white feet and ears, which made me want to call him Muffs or Boots when we got him, but Mabel won that war after a week of following

me around repeating "Lawn Meower! Lawn Meower!"

Once Mabel was gone, I cleaned up the living room. I wound up and got mother's yarn in the basket resting on the floor beside her chair. I spent a short amount of time neatening the room, keenly aware of the dropping temperatures in our frail little house. There was one spot that I spent a bit of time longer than usual neatening, my father and uncle's shrine.

They died after being stranded from a plane accident, I don't know the details, or understand how planes



work. They're super new technology, even now, and what the people said when they told us that father and uncle died was that someone working on it didn't know how it worked.

Money had always been tight. Having six mouths to feed was a lot on the money mom made working as a seamstress and knitter and the small salaries the Wright brothers provided Uncle and Father for helping to build and test their planes. But after they passed, it was worse. Even before then, we had never indulged in anything fancy, we were happy with our old washbin and oven. And I heard a lot from my old classmates complaining about finicky technology that caused me to evade it. Something called washing machines were becoming commonplace in people's homes, but my classmates always talked about how it snagged their stockings and stained their dresses.

I ran my hand over a framed photo of the two men. It was the last one of them, taken just a few short minutes before they jumped over the cliff behind them. They were wearing their pilots' outfits, blood splatters on fathers shoulder from a pretty deep cut on uncle's cheek that was dripping the thick red liquid. They were smiling though, despite that and the lifeless bodies of people on the flight with them littered behind them. Even though Mag and mom were the related ones, those two were inseparable, even in death, it often felt like they were the ones who were siblings.

I took my hand from the picture and walked back into the kitchen, which was now cold enough for me to be able to see my own breaths. Tears stung the back of my eyes as I pulled the still slightly warm pie from the windowsill and placed it on the wooden countertops. I closed the window with a loud pop, which caused the whole brittle house to grunt in disapproval.

"Is that your wonderful pie I smell?" Mom asked, rubbing sleep from her eyes. Her hair was a wild mess from the static that the chair had produced when she was sleeping. She put a wrinkled finger on the porcelain to check the temperature before walking to the cupboard for serving utensils.

"Sister, go get Mabel!" she called to Mag, who was now hanging Mabel's dresses to dry on a rack in front of the fireplace.

Mom cut us all pieces of pie, and as she did I watched. I could never cut a pie nicely, even after watching her do it hundreds of times over. We all sat around the old cedar table with chipping sky blue paint to eat the pie. Mother had put it on the regular dishes, chipped and scratched porcelain with pink roses around the face's rim. We were in a circle, me across from Mabel, Mag to my right, and Mom to my left.

We ate the pie in a comfortable silence, just the outside wind shaking the trees and the sounds of our chewing breaking it.

Mabel was the first to break the silence. "When I told Miss Alesgale that your birthday was upcoming, she wished for me to grant you a happy birthday for her."

"Tell her thank you when you resume school next year then," I replied, feeling queasy about what this pie meant. This pie was a tradition in our house. A woman would cook it on her eighteenth birthday, to prove she no longer needed the coddling of a child. I didn't like being an adult now; it meant that I didn't have school with the kids my age or with Miss Allegedale anymore, and it also meant that I had to learn a trade or get a job.

The next day was even colder than the day prior as I redid myself to go into the town. The fountain where Mabel had found Lawn Meower had a bulletin board where shop owners would post ads for when they needed assistance. It had been a while since I'd been into town, I didn't much like how people gawked at my gold ringlets and eyes with two different colors, one light blue and one dark brown.

My family loved how I looked, and they said that the townspeople did too, but the way they would stare made me feel otherwise. Overall, this town was very accepting and kind, but when you looked different from the others like I did, it was more of a curse than a blessing. I would hear people snickering about it and making crude comments directly beside me.

I looked at myself in the full length mirror that was resting on the wall of my sisters and I's bedroom. It was the only thing that mother had ever splurged on for a present, and she had given it to us for my sixteenth and Mabel's thirteenth birthday, since they were only about a month and a half apart, with Mabel's being before mine.

The outfit I had decided to wear was simple but cute, but wearing it would be futile under the heaps of winter clothing I would have to wear for the trek into town. After I wrangled myself into the coats, I shoved my feet into some old winter boots, tying the frayed laces in a simple bow.

"I'm heading out now, Mom!" I called out to the sitting room, where mom was wrestling with Lawn Meower for one of her knitting needles.

"Be back before nightfall!" she called out, looking up, which gave him the opportunity to grab the needle and bolt away with it clasped in his mouth.

The trek to town was cold and miserable. The piles of snow bordering to stone roads soaked through my boots within minutes of me beginning my walk, and I couldn't feel either my feet or my fingertips. The closer I got to the town, however, the warmer the air around me got. People would set up bonfires to warm the outside for when they or others needed to run their errands.

I could see Anna and Dorothy Miller, the two married women who ran the orphanage. There were a lot of lesbians in town, since there were very few men and no one here saw it as taboo. I heard that in other places, lesbians were tortured and terrorized, and that people claimed they were living in sin. The townspeople rarely ventured out of town, and not just for that reason. All of us were seen as oddities because we didn't celebrate a religion, we accepted lesbians, and women were seen as equals to men.

The bulletin board was packed full of water damaged and soaked papers, some talking about the new city, while others for sales on goods for the end of the year. There was one that had a protective sheath, which was rare. Most people just printed a lot of papers, not caring if one got messed up.

I swiped away the frost that had built up on the sheath to read what was posted underneath. It was, as expected, a help wanted ad from a nearby shop. It wasn't quite normal, however. It was written and colored with chalk pastels, and in vibrant color no less, as well as the paper being for a small shop opened up by a new family in town. It struck me as odd, all of these new things, but I shrugged it off. I likely hadn't been in town since Mabel's birthday, so things were bound to have changed.

The address on the printed paper was easy enough to remember, so I made my way through the town and slightly down an un-shoveled dirt path to the shop. By this point, the sun was high in the sky and my pants were soaked up to my knees. Above the door there was a brightly colored sign reading; Fletchers Fletching Trinkets.

I chuckled slightly at the name, and, just by glancing into the shop, full of trinkets from all over the region, it was accurate. Stepping into that shop was like stepping into another world. The pale yellow and white striped wallpaper mixed with the seafoam green crown molding at the ceiling made an unlikely but beautiful combination. And from what I could see of the room, everything was a pastel shade of something, making the place feel straight out of a fairytale. The more I looked around, the more I noticed that almost every surface was covered in trinkets. There were miniature books, little tiny ones I'd heard Mabel talking about, a lot of silver cutlery, and way more porcelain plates than I'd ever seen in my life.

"Hello!" A woman's voice chirped from a walnut covered desk, once again covered in trinkets. "Sorry for the mess! My husband just got back with a lot of things, and we have nowhere to put them right now!"

I still couldn't see the woman, but I heard a commotion of someone falling from a bit to the left of where I assumed she was.

"Mom!" a girl exclaimed, there was a hint of whining in her voice, like she was tired of something. "I thought you told dad to not get a lot of things, I've already pulled out every display case and I've been organizing for hours! I'm not even halfway done yet!"

"Oh calm down, Gisaelia," a man said, and, although I couldn't see any of the three of them, I could tell her was her dad. He hefted something up, either Gisaelia or a box she was most likely carrying. "A little hard work won't kill you."

The daughter, Gisaelia, walks into my line of sight and stops dead in her tracks. She's beautiful, with perfectly straight jet black hair pulled into a messy half-up half-down style. Her eyes make me envious, however, they are this shade of emerald green that shines radiantly against the room around her and her pale skin. "There's a person.."

I give an awkward little wave to her and want more than anything to melt into the floor. "Yeah, it's me, a person."

Gisaelia's mother walks over to her, and I can see that she looks almost identical to her daughter, just slightly more tanned and taller. Seeing the two of them together is a sight to behold, their breathtaking beauty is really something else. "Oh, are you here because you saw the flier we put up?"

I nod my head vigorously, trying not to portray just how nervous I feel to them. Gisaelia's mother continues her introduction sweetly, seeming excited to meet me. "Well, I am Emelia and that," she gestures to the area of the shop where she had previously come from, where a crash sounded out, "is my husband, Otis. You can likely put the rest together, however, so I will not bother you with more details."

Her mother turns on the heel of her foot, pivoting away while humming to herself. "Okay listen," Gisaelia says, moving her face a short distance away from mine, she sounds curious. "How are your eyes two different colors?"

I step back in astonishment of the brazenness of her question. A defensive tone takes on my voice when I speak next "Uh.. Well... It's uhm.. Natural?"

"I wish I had your eyes, they're so pretty, I just got left with these boring old green eyes." She looks me in the eye, something that only my family has done in a long time. "You're so pretty, I'm so envious."

I chuckle at the irony of us both being envious of each other's appearances. Gisaelia looks at me, a little confused, before seeming to understand what is so funny and bursting into an adorable fit of giggles. "Would you want to work here once we open?"

"Yes please!" I exclaim, feeling a massive wave of excitement wash over me and erase all of my former anxiety.

"Yay!" she shouts, throwing her hands up into the air before pulling me into a tight hug. "I'll tell my mom."

The weeks after my first meeting with Gisaelia were more chaotic than anything I could ever dream of. I went up to her family's shop most every day, helping organize and talk about working statistics. During this time, I mentioned this shop to Mabel, who began spreading the word about a trinkets shop opening on the day of the new year.

I woke up on New Year's Day with a pit of nervousness settled deep into my stomach. I knocked over multiple items trying to ready myself for the walk up to Fletcher's shop. Today was slightly warmer than some of the days we'd been having prior, and thus, I decided to leave one of my winter jackets at home for my journey there.

I got there just as the sun was begging to crest the horizon. Its light was kissing the earth, bathing our town in numerous hues of pinks and oranges. Gisaelia climbs down a mahogany staircase wearing a matching shirt to the one I have on under my coats, a seafoam green blouse with printed on patches stating the name of the shop. There were two patches, one over my heart, which said just the name of the store, and one on the entirety of the back. That one had this fancy logo that was filled with a bunch of the trinkets that were stored at the very top of the window display.

I walk through the room to the cash register, which is where Gisaelia'll be working. She's leaning on it, looking eminently adorable. I shake the odd thought out of my head and open the doors for the people to arrive later in the day.

The early morning is slow, since not many people like to go outside before the sun has had time to envelop our town in its rays of heat, not that there was any in the dead of winter. Once afternoon hits, though, it gets really crowded and hot there. Gisaelia is working efficiently while simultaneously assisting me in not panicking about how many people there are who aren't even trying to be discreet about staring at me.

Once evening falls, the shop has sold what feels like a million items. "Hey, Maisley?" Gisaelia asks me. "Could I spend the night at your place? Mom and Dad are leaving for some kind of business meeting at dawn, and I don't want to be alone."

I nod vigorously before remembering how different my quaint, creaky old house is from hers. Her house is the apartment on top of the shop, and it looks lavish from some short time I spent there. My stomach is doing these flips, like it can't tell whether it's excited or nervous about being in Gisaelia's presence. I don't know why, my body had never done any of these weird things before I met Gisaelia, but now, they seem to happen in almost every interaction we have.

We made it back to my home just before the sun would copy its morning routine and bathe the town in beauty. When my house came into sight, the pale blue trim and white shudders were hard to spot, they had long been covered with the growing ivy on the house, as well as dirt and debris the winds and storms picked up. It was a sad little thing. The house, built over one-hundred-and-fifty years ago, was a one floor building. It had a massive porch though, which made it great for cool summer nights, or climbing up to the roof.

I ran to the front door and opened it for Gisaelia, making sure my gesture seemed pleasant and not like I was hiding something. "Sorry that it's so dirty."

Gisaelia turned around and wrapped me in the tightest hug ever, "What do you mean? This house is amazing!"

"What?" I asked, immensely confused how someone living in a two story store-house thing would prefer my house. In response, Gisaelia gestured around before her eyes landed on Lawn Meower.

"You have a kitten?" her eyes widened in excitement, like how Lawn Meower does to his toys. I could tell she wanted to pet him. "Can I pet it, pretty please?"

Instead of responding, I picked up Lawn Meower and set him in her arms, where he immediately snuggled up. "He's my sister's cat, and his name is Lawn Meower. Don't ask me why, save that for my sister."

With that, Gisaelia began to giggle in her cute way. Her body was shaking, trying to suppress a bigger laugh, but she looked as though she was trying not to bother Lawn Meower. She looked even prettier than usual right now, and I was glad to have her as my friend.

"Maisley!" My sister called out in her favorite sing-song voice. She pranced into the opening foyer shortly afterwards, not caring that there was another person in the house. "Mama said you wouldn't be home until after dark, why are you here?"

"Because," I started, I loved having silly conversations with my sister, "I'm a superhero, and usually my work is late, but tonight I fought all that crime early!"

Both Mabel and Gisaelia burst into laughter at that point, with Gisaelia finding my comment funny and Mabel loving how I kept our joke alive. When she was about six, I started telling her these things, and now, at fifteen going on sixteen, she still loved when I would play on it.

We ate dinner as usual that night, the only difference was the chair pulled up between me and aunt Mag. We had normal conversations overall, but my heart would not stop feeling like it was going to beat out of my chest.

After dinner was finished, mom went to do the dishes. The light of the sun was now completely gone, but I had something to show Gisaelia. I took her to my room, where Mabel was playing with Lawn Meower on her bed. I pulled out my father's old telescope, the one I only pulled out on special occasions, and Mabel gave me a look.

I held the telescope under my arm and showed Gisaelia to the ladder on the porch. It was secluded, hidden behind some half-dead potted plants of tomato and cucumber. I let her go up first, making sure she wouldn't fall, before following in suit.

I sat on the flattest area of the roof, and likely the sturdiest too. I was still at about a ten to fifteen percent slope downward, but it was flat enough to lay out the telescope. "Look up," I told Gisaelia, she did, and just at that moment, what I wanted to show her began.

I had wanted to show her the meteor shower occurring tonight, as it was rarer than a blue moon for us to have one visible. I glanced over at Gisaelia and felt my heart rate speed up. Mom always mentioned how she felt that way around father, and Mag did about uncle. I never know how that could happen, your heart beating so fast you feel nauseous, or the want to know everything about this person, to always be near them. That couldn't be what I was feeling, there were lesbian women in town, sure, but that wasn't me. I was just the girl who everybody judged and who loved nobody.

We sat there for hours, sporadically talking about trivial things, like how many pets we had as kids. I remembered all of her answers to my questions clearly, even without trying to remember them. "Hey Maisley," Gisaelia said after a bit, I looked down to see her fidgeting with her outermost coat sleeves. "Can I do something?"

I nodded and she paused, hesitating on what she was about to do. She leaned in and kissed me on the cheek, just a little peck, but it sent my mind reeling. Suddenly, the world felt like too much and not enough, the stars falling from the sky above us, my ivy covered house beneath us, the icy air surrounding us.

Gisaelia leaned over to my ear. "I hope you know that I love you."

AYLA DICKENS, GRADE 9

Imaginary Love Story

I don't know much about my origins. I don't know how my parents met, or how their parents met. I don't know what it's like to carry a child in your belly, hopes and dreams pinned somewhere underneath your belly button. I don't know how it feels to have something so fragile as a newborn in your hands, or to know that the baby in your arms is *yours*. Not yours like a phone or a house, yours like your mind, your heart, your soul. I do know this: sometimes, things aren't how you imagined they would be. Sometimes, your family isn't how family is usually portrayed in the media: a man, a woman, a son, and a daughter. I want to know what my parents were like before they had me, but I don't want to ask. I have my own version of events, however, pieced together from various romance novels and K-dramas.

I imagine that my father was a troublemaker. Fast, furious, and so spirited that he intimidated everyone around him. Skinny and strong in all the right places, footsteps heavy but expression always light. Despite how he appeared on the surface, he was a softie. Silver-tongued and quick, he used his wit to bring people up instead of push them down. My mother was loud with a big personality, but she knew when to listen. Silly and strong, she was light-hearted and kind. When she said she was going to do something, she did it. She always came through, and she loved helping her friends. Despite being the smartest, most promising in her class, she was the life of the party, always out with her friends.

They met in college, but neither of them were looking for a relationship, so he drove her around in his red Chevy Corvette late into the night. He sped a lot and paid more for the tickets he accumulated than the price of the actual car, but the thrill was worth it. They felt invincible.

Then, something happened. They separated, found other people. Graduated. Grew up. Years later, they found each other again in a hole-in-the-wall coffee shop. She was drinking tea. He was downing black coffee.

"You'll ruin your stomach like that," she would tell him, having studied in the medical field for long enough to know that men don't listen to women even when they're right. But she said it anyway.

He wouldn't respond even though he recognized her. She would smile shyly, like the girls in the dramas she watched. She was anything but shy. Strong, fierce, and beautiful, she was a handful and a half. He thought he could tame her, and she thought she could fix him. Not a great beginning for a romance story.

They kept meeting like that, but not on purpose. Eventually, they started going out, and he proposed to her two years later while they ate dinner at a mom-and-pop's Italian restaurant. He loved her more than anything in the world, and she admired him in a way only lovers can. They got married eight months later, and they were unstoppable; he was funny, slick, and knew the right thing to say in every situation. He was sensitive and strong, a good listener and helper. She was energetic and easily excitable, often laughing at his jokes even if they were bad.

Although they had everything they had wished for, they craved more. Someone with her blonde hair, slim wrists, and dancer's frame; with his golden-brown eyes and long legs. They wanted a child.

They tried over and over again, slowly feeling numb after failing to create life. They had so much of it, so why couldn't they share? She turned to the spiritual side, searching for homeopathic medicines and magical teas. He simply continued on, praying to a god he didn't believe in. They started to lose faith. Started to wonder why they were failing.

Just then, something marvelous happened. Her belly swelled and grew, siphoning her strength and his spirit to create a child. Their name was Zoey, they said, a beautiful name for a beautiful child. It was me. My hands were the perfect size to fit around his thumb, skin the same shade as his own. I fit right into the crook of my mother's arm, face turned upward while I smiled. I was perfect.

But, no good thing lasts forever, and the two fell out of love. She, tired after caring for me, wanted to fall asleep and wake up next to him. He wanted to stay out late and drink in celebration of his new daughter, shirking his newfound responsibilities. She grew weary, he grew impatient. I grew up faster than either of them could have expected; the days were long but the years were short.

They separated. I was forced to make an impossible choice. They blamed each other for their own shortcomings, seldom realizing that I could hear it all. It stung, but I could bear it. I could keep them together.

I failed, blaming herself for not being able to win against losing odds. It hurt, but I could take it.

They fought. I listened. He left, she stayed. He came back, realizing he had nowhere to go. Years later, they found other people. They built families and moved on.

I don't know when fiction blends to fact, but I do know that my origins are unknown. I'd like to keep it that way; I rather like the story I came up with. One thing I know for certain, however, is that I believed a traditional family was what I needed to complete me. All I needed was to be loved completely, and I always was. I always was.

ZOEY DUDDING, GRADE 10

The Red Dutchman

The red door lies broken on the beach,
Watching the city of pirates reign over the black sea.
Lightning strikes the ocean twice, conjuring the red sailors'
Battle fleet with a glow of scarlet.

The red Dutchman voices plagues of rum and lime,
Siren-calling souls turned sailors to the ocean.

Fortune tempts contracts. shaking hands with the devil
Cursing blood shots of scurvy.

Sea chanties in cursive red touch paper, bounding
Spirits to Davy Jones' locker while
Priests pray for the lost, sending the book of prayer
To the sea in rows of seven, placing God's domain among the ocean

MATTHEW GREISE, GRADE II

Sea Beans

Dredging up the bulbs of life
From the murky grime
With a cluster of these seeds
In my hand, I drop to sit in the sand,

Both hands full, I peel away their shells
The dew from some other planet
Sticks to my fingers, binding them onto sharp grass,
I bury them like they're dead, in case they are now,

I'd have lied if I said I knew if it would grow
This foreign raft from the muck's mouth
From up the creek, in the bay, or
Just across the stream, and regretfully, I killed it.

At this point, my hands are cut
I bury seed after seed, then approach the dock
Throwing sand like bread crumbs, pretending
To feed the fish. And I do it every time.

CLAY GRINNAN, GRADE IO

Pantoum for a Military Brat

I'm roaming along the sandy shores of Beaufort's beaches,
left to build castles and dreams under a setting sun.
Purple skies silhouette friends' faces:
people I know far too little.

Left, to build castles and dreams under the setting sun,
turn left to DC, cherry blossom trees and kindergarten classmates:
people I know far too little,
floating ghosts of memories abandoned.

Turn left to DC, cherry blossom trees and kindergarten,
go straight to Albany, sticky hot air and skipping home from school.
Floating ghosts of memories no one stuck around to stay in—
except friends' homes I remember more than my own.

Go straight to Albany, sticky hot air and skipping home from school,
board a plane to Brussels, leave everyone I've not known well enough.
Accept friends' homes I remember more than my own,
looking for stuffed bears sitting in windowsills during the pandemic.

Board a plane to Brussels, leave everyone I've not known well enough,
fly back overseas, to Virginia, revisit old forgotten family,
looking for stuffed bears sitting in windowsills during the pandemic,
find nothing but dirty streets and a hatred for change.

Fly back overseas to Virginia, revisit old forgotten family.
Look for something I could love,
Find nothing but dirty streets and a hatred for change,
truly from a place I no longer remember.

Look for something I could love,
purple skies silhouetting friends' faces.
Truly from a place I no longer remember:
I've roamed from the sandy shores of Beaufort's beaches.

JETTA HALE, GRADE 10

Childhood

Remember when we were little girls dancing
in the sun, swaying our hips in the arched rainbow
reflected from the spray of the water hose, crying
and laughing and putting ourselves up for purchase,
for the take of men and the disapproving eyes of
our foremothers. Remember when we were little boys
painting the felled fence in mud and rocks, dirtying
our clean linen clothes and not so much as swaying
but gnashing around in the grunge of the alley.
Remember when we were caught in the nothingness
of childhood?

MADISON INGRAM, GRADE 12

Young Girl Dreaming

Outside, it's cold. Water cries down the cheeks
of a canvas, hard to see against a dark sky
but easy to hear as it dully thuds against my
mother's car, landing in puddles on worn pavement.

My young body drifts in and out of sleep, a
dreamy, swirling familiarity causing my tired mind
to swim, ripples dancing through imagination
like a rock skipping across the mysterious creek
behind my grandparents' big white house.

Curiosity creeps up my spine, crawling as ants do
over jagged concrete sidewalks. I want to touch clouds,
to be a bird gliding through smooth blue skies
and sing high in the trees. I clutch dreams
close to my chest, grasping at them when I wake,
startled by a bump in the road, or a turn
reminding me that I am inching closer to another
finished car ride, a rare late night begging to
slip into bed without brushing my teeth.

The car window, slick with rain, reflects a face back
to me, cheeks pink with warmth. In blue-green shades,
I see that lingering fear of darkness, of what lurks
behind cracked doors and under beds. Asleep,
I'll find myself in the body of a stronger woman,
someone older who will take matters into her own
hands, guiding sharp metal through fur and skin,
ending the beast that has haunted me for as long
as I could remember. She would bring me safety,
like the feeling of my mother or father's arms
carefully pressed against my back.

Eyelids slowly flutter open with each sigh
my small lungs heave. We'll get home soon,
and I'll begin to wonder whether or not
I am too heavy to be gently carried inside.

PIPER JAMESON, GRADE II

My First Friend

I don't remember the first time I held a rock, but I remember the first time one held me. It was small enough to disappear in my palm, smooth from water or time, maybe both. I carried it like a secret. While other kids collected things that glittered loudly, I was drawn to what shimmered quietly. Crystals tucked into dirt, geodes that looked ordinary until they broke open and revealed a universe inside. Loving rocks just felt right, like recognizing a language I already knew how to speak.

As I got older, that love grew stronger. Crystals taught me patience, they took centuries to become what they were, and they asked nothing from me except stillness. Geodes reminded me not to judge by surface alone, that roughness can protect something delicate, and beauty doesn't always announce itself. I'd line them on my shelves like fine china, each one a lesson in pressure, survival, and transformation. In moments when I felt fractured, I was comforted knowing that even broken stone could be breathtaking.

Now, my connection to rocks feels like a bond that can never be broken. They ground me when I float too far into my thoughts, and they remind me that time is not an enemy but a collaborator. Loving rocks isn't about believing they have power over me. It's about understanding that I'm shaped by what I endure. Like crystals and geodes, I'm becoming something slowly, beautifully, from the inside out.

RA'JARIE JEFFERSON, GRADE 9

Lives Like This

Did you or your people build a home after freedom?
Have they told you where sweet glory lies?
Where your mother sang songs of the lord,
awaiting her time for reprimands from society.
Meanwhile, your father works day and night for
scraps and pennies that never see the light of day.

And you, fulfilling your role by helping the
around the house. Cooking dinner, tending to
the children. Typical. They'll tell you to go
to school. Danger looms over your lives
wherever you go. Get an education, be different.
Become something great, something to be
proud of. Make your family proud. Always,
Always.

On the outside looking in, your family
is poor. But you've always wondered how
a family so rich in happiness could be
considered poor. You see the beauty
in lives like this; the authenticity,
the love, the hope.

LORELLE LAWSON, GRADE 10

Forever Here

Four
Four walls
Two purple and two white
The walls I ran to after he yelled
Yelled, "All you do is mess things up."
And I believed him

Walls covered in princesses and fairies that have
Watched over me for years
Ones that will until I move
Ones that I compared myself to
Ones that comforted me
Ones that kept me safe

Colors seep into the carpet on the ground
Shoes scattered around with no real place to go
And an owner with no real motivation to find one
A red bookshelf with cut marks and paint forever lodged
Into the wood
Filled with books I've wanted but have never read,
Books from childhood I have and never forgot

Every now and then, I reread to see if I find the same feeling
I never do

White papers crumpled behind chairs filled with the same colors that
decorate the floor
Responsibilities piled up in corners
Hoping to be burned away

KILANNAH LEE-EVANS, GRADE 9

Beauty

The bubbles on my soapy hands sparkle in dusty rays of sun,
and in their reflection, I see your smile, broad and smart. In my garden,
you are mint and wildflowers, unintentional and welcome. You
are the clasp on my necklace and the timestamp on my photos, the trail
of clouds an airplane leaves and tiny crabs burrowing in sand. You
are every word on the pages of my books, every cell
of the soft skin on my palms, every stitch on the silk
of the pillowcase on which I rest my head. You are the gleam
on the pearl from the oyster my father cracked open,
the black dot in the *i* of my name, the wood grain of the desk I write at,
the running yolk of the egg my mother cooks for me. You are sunny-side up.
You are the song of the dawn chorus,
the ladybugs that come in through the bathroom windows. You are
the peeling paint of the watering can under the kitchen sink, the cat's pupils
no more than slits. You are the silent overnight snowfall
that delights me at dawn. You are herbs stretching to reach their grow light,
their own god. You are the smoke after a candle. Yesterday, you were
the curls in my best friend's hair, and tomorrow,
you will be the earthy raindrops soaking into me
as they fall back home. You are the tears of my mother
greeting her newborns, neither of which you would live to meet.
Grandma Cook, you are my origin, the very beginning
of my love for the world. You are beauty itself.
If only you could see me now.

KATIE LOEB, GRADE II

Green

★Second Place, Nancy Bolmeier Fisher Scholarship Recipient★

green (grēn) > noun 1. Any of a group of colors whose hue is that of growing grass or of emerald, lying between yellow and blue. 2. My birthstone, dangling on an inherited gold chain, resting on my chest, held up by a tarnishing angel. 3. My mother, her mother's, and my favorite color. 4. My curtains draped on a dead window, cloth pulled across the solemn face of my home.

green (grĕn) > verb 1. To mother. 2. To buy curtains in your daughter's favorite color to stretch her into the sleeve of a house, clothing the warmth of her skin. 3. To contradict. 4. To bury your mother back into the green earth. I was four when my mother's body, my grandmother's body, curled into a knot in a corn maze. I knew red snow cone glaze, autumnal lips, and my mother's hand as she sat by her sister, her eyes a dead window into the heat of the homeland, into the heat of the nightsweats, into the heat of her mother, her back bent over a stove in a dirt floor hut, roof full of snakes, curtains green. Cooking up something in coconut milk, never kissing her daughter, but always dusting her emerald curtains.

(First definition is adapted from Merriam-Webster)

ISABELLA LYONS, GRADE 12

Self-Portrait in Abstract Thought

You will find me where anchor meets bird, somewhere between
devil and sky. I am written in a child's textbook margins; I am
petals pressed between pages. Pinched by pointer and thumb,
I am your favorite specimen. I am change loose in your drawer.
Catch me at the junction between cloud and earth, my head on
soft pillows and my body wrapped in soil. I am not trapped nor
torn; I am no more lost than a gull over water. I am temporary;
I am metamorphosis. I am fragments: one of thousands, a spoke
along your wheel. I am silent; I am louder than the sea. I am whole.

TRIS MEAGHER, GRADE II

A King's Origin

I come from a line of kings,
blue-toned bodies washed up on
beaches, seaweed entangled in their crowns.

Kings with no throne, for in each
generation, they are destined to run.

I come from a long line of kings
lost in the timelessness of lapped waves, gold
speckles, hazel eyes, wealthy in salted tears.

Kings who can't comprehend the
loss of a legitimate line to lust.

I come from a line of royalty,
noble in the eyes of the gods
they no longer believe.

Slaves who think smearing the name
King will unbrand their blood.

ENDIYA MURRELL, GRADE 12

Letter to My Future Self

Dear _____,

If nothing else sticks
to your smooth membrane of mush,
always remember squirrels
actually existed. They ran across
gravel roads, darted past stalling
trucks, scrambled up the trunks
of trees— Those brown giants
with acid-colored hair. Tiny
as they were, you once cried over
their flesh sprawled on the side of highways.

All you will have left to cherish
are steel imitations welded
in damp, crowded factories.
Screws collected for hibernation.
Their metal teeth miss out
on acorns. Real squirrels
will be shunned. They are not
for purchase, but if you can find one,
try to help it cross the street. Or
make sure it sells well.

You likely won't remember this but
flowers were once wild in their growth, lining
beaten paths and untarnished forest floors.
Petals are now deeply rooted under
layered concrete slabs.
Can your feeble brain handle
that image? Are the memories too
dual for your fading mind to grasp?
Deal with it.

In this growing world of
metal and miasma, you are not
allowed to run from our past. Clench
eyelids shut tight— *tighter*—
and stare into nothingness until
light dredges up. Follow that shine;
bask in it. Once you're so charged
your skin turns to golden stars,
explode. Spread your ashes across
Earth and fertilize this bare rock.
Death will be the last request I have of you.

NIALA MYRICK, GRADE 12

Burden of Being

They never tell me what it takes to be strong, only that I am weak. I was never taught how to balance the burning book set atop my skull, only that I should never let it fall. Their all encompassing hands would push me to the edge of a cliff and watch as I wobble, the book teetering with me as it sears the meat beneath my skin.

When I hold the weight of the earth up above my head my arms grow weary with fatigue, and it burrows deep into the space in my lungs. It curls and presses against my spine and my back begins to throb with an ache that digs under my skin and leaves its seeds deep in my bones. Still, I keep my hands held high and the earth firm in my grasp as I watch them hold up thoughtless praise of my diligence for everyone to see. As though I am a spectacle to witness. As though I am an achievement to admire

When I pull myself up by my boot straps, they take my precious golden spoons laced with the energy to fuel my soul, and replace them with their fickle green paper dipped in greed. Never will they know I tugged myself up, out of the eternal spite I hold for them, and never will they acknowledge the skin ripped from the palms of my hands, because never will they accept that in order to do it, I first had to learn how to fly.

CADENCE LYNÆ OGZEWALLA, GRADE 9

Lilacs in Decay

Grandmother's tears for her lost love

Still, he wallows in a cratered field out of which lilacs and cruel green bloom.

A constant reminder.

Time passed. Love filled but not replaced

By someone else.

As one young daughter shaped to be a woman

four more boys were sprung.

Worn leather—her face began to sag, hair still set,

Lipstick applied—of her couch

On which she sits

with familiar faces promising renewal.

LISETTE PELLETIER, GRADE 9

Where I Come From

My families origin is much different from mine

I come from the city, where the bricks of our houses touch

My mother comes from the south, where she would play until the street lights started shining like the valley stars

My father spent his teenage years kicking down those street lights, and pining over my beautiful mother

The woman that I look up to the most is my grandmother from Russia, well not really

She is from West Virginia where they say warsh instead of wash

My family spent years of bills on the kitchen table, and small town charm

I never believed that I had any of this origin within me, until all of my friends told me I had an accent,

That I sound like a farmer,

And maybe all of these things made me who I am today.

ELIZABETH POOL-MITCHELL, GRADE 9

Cervine Soliloquy

I have the body of a doe, agile and
rather thin. I have the temperament
of a buck; my antlers make an array of
spikes or peaks, as I call them.
Those peaks clash against my ruminating thoughts.

My hooves will meet moss when I roam
through tree-shaded areas and on occasion
I will kneel to chew on blades of grass
never swallowing, instead, I will find a rippling
creek, and while I lap up water, my eyes
will meet the reflection I do not recognize.

I have the cry of a fawn, and when I fall, it is
hard to regain my balance. My spots are counted
flaws, a constant reminder that I may not be who
I should be just yet.

My cloven feet have met asphalt in half moon's light,
two beams will head towards me
as I remain, my eyes reflecting the off white
the steel will break my skin as I perform
one last soliloquy.

SARAH POWERS, GRADE II

The Farm

There's a place where children's laughter fills the atmosphere
And the smell of old wood gives us a sense of home.
The lake reflecting off the sun,
Fish jump among the glittering shine.
Red wine fills the stomachs of those who look old enough to drink,
While kids stick to artificial lemonade.

Every room in the house is inhabited,
Mother and her friends on the back porch,
Overlooking a grassy field,
Where kids roam,
Staining their pants and ignoring obvious allergies.
Husbands, boyfriends, and fiances may find themselves in the kitchen,
Speaking of work and the hunting season to come.

One day you'll getting roped into mushroom gathering,
So you put on boots, bug spray,
And set off to the depths of the Canadian wilderness.
Though most are simply to look,
A golden chanterelle, must be cut and delicately placed into the pouch.

To be cleaned, chopped then added to;
A fresh slice of baguette,
A bowl of buttery pasta,
Or maybe just sauteed and eaten with a mix of herbs.
Truly a farm specialty.

Then one cool evening,
Bellies full of poutine and Quebec style pizza,
You will be loaded into the back of a four-wheeler.
One traditionally used to carry farm equipment,
But has been repurposed
And now holds up to six people.
A short ride will take you to 389.
Where you can find;
Horses,
Pigs,
Bison,
Highland cows,
And oh so many goats.
We return to the house smelling of hay and dirt,
But that's all a part of the farm's charm.
Early morning walks down the driveway,
To catch a quick sunrise.
Dogs follow loyally by your side.
Dad stands on the edge of the lake,
Teaching a little one how to fish.
You may catch a glimpse of bloody hands,
Quite an uncomfortable sight,
But it makes a spectacular dinner.

Cutting boards covered in fish organs,
80s music blasting from an old Ipod,
Dancing around the kitchen as guests offer to help.
"Set the table!"
Plates, napkins, and utensils from the 2000s
Are passed around a dark wooden table and an ancient banquette.

As dinner begins,
Food is given out,
Roses and thorns start,
Yet distractions and side conversations are inevitable.

Every morning,
You can breathe a little deeper,
Your shoulders have shed the weight of society,
Maybe work, family,
Whatever you have come to escape from.

Everyone is welcome at the farm,
So come,
Watch a sunrise,
Pet a goat,
Eat good food,
And escape.

PASCALE TRAHAN, GRADE 9

Origins

Origins have different meanings, such as a mathematical term or one's ancestry. But today, we're going to be focusing on its more practical meaning, "where you started from."

For me, there's a ton of different meanings for origin, like origins of hobbies, or things I'm good at, but I think one especially important one, to me, is the origin of my interest in writing. Starting at around seventh grade, I was intrigued by the idea of jotting down things I'm feeling, think are cool, or anywhere in between, onto a piece of paper. It seemed so cool that I could build a world that felt so real, yet was all just on a piece of paper. With this new interest in mind, I began writing a bit more and even won a contest once in 7th grade, albeit not a very significant one, but a contest nonetheless.

Once I reached 8th grade, I learned the existence of a school called Appomattox Regional Governor's School. I learned that this school is unique in the way that they offer specialized education for specific talents, like music, visual art, and even literary arts. Realizing that I had an interest in literature and that I could have a real shot at getting in, I applied for the school. Since the school is fairly high-end and not technically open to just joining, I had to go through an application process. First, I submitted a plethora of my best pieces, which they took and offered me the second part of the process, the interview. The interview was a fairly straightforward process, consisting of a currently-attending student or an alumnus, and a teacher in the literary department at the school. During the interview, we talked about why I like writing, the meaning of some of my pieces, what I'd do if I got into the school, and we straight clowned on my home school's English department.

I was quite nervous after the interview, as I really didn't want to go to my district's high school, but I'd be forced to if I didn't get into this school. A month or two later, I got the notification of acceptance in my email. I was thrilled at this sight, truly, as the thought of me getting into an actual high-quality school was awesome.

Time skip forward to the start of ninth grade, where I am now, and I can say confidently that this was the right choice. I'm able to nurture my literary interests at this school, and I have others who share the same interests as me at my side to aid me in writing as well. Safe to say the origin of my literary interests was a bit of a handful, but that's typical with a subject like origins.

CHRISTOPHER WALSH, GRADE 9

Patty Smith, Grades 9-12 Literary Arts Teacher

Georgia Peach

The sun rose and fell on a small town in southern Georgia. Knixwell County was known for its plump peaches and killer peach lemonade. Men and women who grew as the town did said it's the heart and soul of Georgia. Some say otherwise. But who am I to pick a side? I've never been here before this month. I came down from Tennessee for the summer to visit my aunt Ester. Mom always said she was a bit kooky but I chalked it up to her being estranged. Ya know the "black sheep" of her family. But oh boy was I wrong.

Aunt Ester was different. She was carefree and kind; I guess that's why I loved spending time with her when she lived near us up in Tennessee. My mom was too strict. She always puts so many limitations on things. No television past 8 pm no sugar on school nights. It was boring so the summer of my junior year I knew I needed a break. Ester was the first person I had thought of. I mean sure she was distant from the family but I knew that being distant brings you a lot of peace. Especially when you're around so much pressure growing up. I admired that about her, because I know that's what I wanna do after graduation.

When I first got to Georgia, Aunt Ester and I went out to dinner. Some fancy steak house I'd never been to. It was fun but a bit awkward. The longer I spent with Ester the more I realized she was what you'd say the "nervous" type. She never stood still too long. Never focused on any one thing. Her eyes darted across rooms anytime someone moved an inch. I thought it was odd. "Is she scared of something? Of someone?" I wondered. I continued to eat and brushed it off. We continued eating, laughing, and just catching up. Besides the occasional darting of the eyes, it was chill. This restaurant was super nice. I took in the scenery. Silver cutlery and a black mysterious vibe to the decor. It screamed high-end and the "1%" would definitely dine here often. I wondered how my aunt could afford all of this. When I thought about it I had never asked what she did for work.

"Aunt Ester?" I said curiously.

"Hm?" she said in a low polite tone.

"Not to be rude but what is it you actually do?" I said

She let out a nervous chuckle and didn't acknowledge the subject. I thought to myself how strange it was that she did that.

"Um, okay" I said, confused.

The waiter dressed in all black was on the other side of the room. I waved him over to break up the awkward silence that had just sprouted at the dining table. I was curious about the dessert menu, so I asked the man what they had. He gave me a boring list. My aunt rolled her eyes and just asked for the check. She was generous enough that she covered the bill then we left.

My aunt told me it was a place she wanted to show me that was a little over a 5 minute drive from the restaurant we were at. In the car it was way less awkward because we were jamming to the song that came up on the radio. Something by Miley Cyrus. It was nice, you know? Being with my aunt and feeling care-free.

We got out of the car when we arrived at this bakery. On our way out of the parking lot she was talking about how the outside looked so modern and poetic. I agreed. As soon as we got within 10 feet I could smell treats. I knew that they were delicious just by the smell. My aunt paused and glanced down the street at a car suspiciously but before I could ask the matter her face went back to normal. "Hm, okay whatever." I thought to myself.

The bell jingled as we stepped foot inside. The menu was a tempting list ranging from rich & chocolaty to light and fruity. The list had decadent choices like fudge brownies, molten lava cake, double chocolate mousse, and German chocolate pie. Then came the fruiter things: Fresh berry parfaits, lemon meringue pie, strawberry shortcake, apple cobbler, banana pudding, and key lime tarts. But since we were in Georgia the peach desserts stole the show. They had warm peach cobbler with vanilla bean ice cream, peach pie with a nice golden flaky crust, peach turnovers and even a chilled peach sorbet. There were cookies of every kind, cheesecakes topped with fruit, bread pudding, and trays of even more unique pastries I'd never seen before. This was so much it made it pretty hard to want to choose one thing over another.

My aunt was filled with joy. "She must really like this place" I thought to myself. She had the most beautiful smile on her face as we stood at the pastry display case. You would've thought she'd just gotten a million dollars! I mean it was nice and all but no reason for her to be turning all bright red like she just got a new puppy.

When we finally sat down with our desserts—me with a warm peach cobbler and my aunt with a simple sugar cookie, Esther's mood shifted again. She seemed to be stuck in her head so the joy faded just a little, like

a lightbulb dimming. She kept glancing behind me at the door, then toward the window, then back at her plate even though she wasn't eating anything off it.

"You okay?" I asked, spoon halfway to my mouth.

She nodded too quickly. "Just tired," she said, but her voice didn't match her face. Her fingers kept tapping against the table... tap, tap-tap... tap. It was almost like a rhythm of nerves.

I didn't push it. Not yet.

The bakery was so cozy and warm, filled with the sweet smell of cinnamon sugar, the soft hum of people dining was relaxing. A couple sat near the corner sharing a slice of cheesecake, and two teenagers argued over whether to get brownies or cookies. Everything felt normal here. Safe. But the way Aunt Ester kept watching the door made me feel like I was missing something, something big. Something she didn't want to say out loud.

As I took another bite, I looked around the room. That's when I noticed a peculiar thing –everyone who walked in greeted the cashier by name... except us. And the cashier kept glancing at my aunt like he recognized her but wasn't sure if he should say it.

"Do you come here often?" I asked casually.

Ester froze for half a second before forcing a smile. "Sometimes. Not a lot. Maybe... once in a while." But the cashier definitely knew her. You don't accidentally know someone's favorite cookie, which he mentioned as soon as we had reached the display case earlier.

"Sugar cookie again, Ms. Lane?" he said with a smile as he walked passed, interrupting my thoughts.

Lane? My aunt's last name is Carter.

At first I didn't make a big deal out of it. People give different names all the time. But the more I thought about it, the more it settled wrong in my stomach. Why use a different name at a bakery? Why use it so naturally the cashier didn't even question it? Why have that panicked look in your eye when it gets mentioned? When we stood up to leave, Aunt Ester stuffed the cookie into her purse like she didn't want to leave evidence behind. The cashier opened his mouth like he wanted to say something to her but closed it quickly and looked away. She didn't even say goodbye as we walked out of the bakery.

Outside, the sky was turning peach-colored. Very fitting for Georgia; the air was thick with southern heat. We walked toward the car, but just as Ester reached out for the handle, her hand froze mid-air

Down and across the street a black car was parked with its windows tinted too dark. Not unusual for town... but the engine was running. And it had been running the whole time we were inside the bakery my aunt mentioned. Then Ester whispered something under her breath. I wasn't sure what it was that she said but it sounded like a curse.

"Get in," she said sharply.

Her tone was different. Not nervous. Not awkward. Commanding. I climbed into the passenger seat as my heart picked up speed. She pulled out of the lot so fast the tires screeched, and I gripped the door handle. "Aunt Ester?" I asked, voice barely above a whisper. "What's going on?" She didn't answer. She just kept driving, eyes locked on the road like she didn't dare blink.

"Ester—" "Not right now," she snapped.

My stomach dropped. She never snapped at me. Ever. Wind rushed through the crack in the window. The radio still played that Miley Cyrus song from before, but the carefree vibe was completely gone. My aunt's hands were shaking around the steering wheel, knuckles white.

"Aunt Ester... who was that back there? In the car?" I asked. She exhaled shakily, like she'd been holding her breath since we walked out of the bakery.

"No one you need to know," she said first. But then her voice cracked, and she corrected herself. "Not yet."

Not yet? My heart started to thunder in my ears. We were only 5 minutes into our summer and here we are. My aunt didn't head back toward the house. She never even slowed down. She ran a red light on the boulevard

ahead. Then she veered off the main road onto an old dirt path that cut straight through the peach orchids like a scar. “The Knixwell family won’t be too happy with this” I thought to myself. But that didn’t matter because the headlights behind us didn’t disappear.

The dirt path got smaller as the peach trees pressed in against both sides of the car, their branches clawing against the windows like fingernails. The car kicked up dust behind us, choking the air. Esther’s foot was still heavy on the gas. When suddenly... headlights beamed in the rearview mirror. Too close for comfort. Way too close.

“They followed us,” I whispered in terror, but my voice could barely get past my throat.

The black car burst onto the path like it had been waiting for us to run. Its engine roared, chewing the dirt. It was gaining on us, and fast. It didn’t slow and never hesitated. It rammed into the back left of the car, throwing us violently toward the windshield. Esther cursed out loud and tried to fight the wheel.

“Hold On!” she shouted as her face scrunched.

The car lurched, then we crashed into a ditch. My breath was knocked out of me.

“Out,” Esther gasped. I barely felt the sore opening as I stumbled out into the haze. Dirt burned my throat and I couldn’t see more than a few feet ahead. Headlights flared somewhere behind us.

“They’re here,” I choked.

Ester grabbed my wrist, “Run.”

We sprinted through the orchard as branches tore at my skin. The sound of an engine revving behind us, then nothing. All I could hear is the soft cracking of twigs beneath my shoe. We stopped to catch our breath once we were sure we lost them. “Ester,” I whispered; my voice barely still, please just tell me what’s going on,”

For a second all I heard was her heavy uneven breathing. Then something in her pocket buzzed. It wasn’t a normal ringtone but a sharp, clipped vibration that made her flinch. Ester reached in her pocket and tore through a snag in the right of her pants. She reached deeper and pulled out a slim unmarked phone. A burner. The screen turned red as a notification popped up on the screen. She didn’t even open it. She stared at it as if it carried a countdown.

“Aunt Ester...what are you doing with that,” I asked, in a scared tone, knowing that whatever the answer was I may not want to know.

She didn’t speak right away. Her fingers trembled as she set the burner faced down on the dashboard, like even looking at it was dangerous. She looked like she was about to cry. Tears formed in her eyes as she met mine slowly

“Because” she said quietly as her voice strained

“If they find me again, they won’t let either of us go.”

JANELLE BREWTON, GRADE 12

I Am From

I am from a home that smells like hot chocolate with marshmallows melting

I am from a home with *Tangled* playing on the TV, “Mother Knows Best” repeating over and over in my memory

I am from pizza parties crowned with tiaras
and teacups clinking on the living room floor,
my single mom making Friday nights special.

I am from a house of laughter over Uno rules
and the thrill of Mario Kart races where a win is measured in giggles and teasing.

I am from a home stacked with a museum of books

I am from a home of library trips every Saturday afternoon,

My arms weighed down with promise for new adventures.
 I am from Miguel, who crossed the ocean as an immigrant
 and served this country for decades to earn his place in the world
 I am from Joanne, who defends the indigent at all hours of the day
 while battling cancer.
 She still meets me at the bus stop with a smile and a hug.
 I am from a home that feels tranquil and safe---
 Home of privilege built on tears and struggle.
 I am from a home my great-grandmother came to this country, hoping for
 I am from the home my grandfather dreamed of
 I am from a home where we use our voices to advocate for the unseen
 I am from a home that joins hands with those who fight against the wrongs of this world.
 I am from a home where I learned to use my pen to tell the stories of the untold.

JOCELYN CARSON, GRADE 10

Forest Hill

The trickle of water flowing off a half-foot cliff
 And my stupid,
 Labored breathing
 Looking out across the lake
 Past the trash islands, across the algae peninsulas
 Lies a navy blue heron
 Great, still, waiting
 Hunting, lunging for desperate carp
 Who swim away from the end of their lives
 I blink with content and continue on
 Leaving my class to exclaim their disappointment at the bird
 Scaring it towards the Reedy Creek
 Jesus, could you all be any more crazy?
 Shaking my head, and walking up the paved hill
 Wondering how long it will be
 Until I can do this again

MADISON COPPEDGE, GRADE 11

Virginia Verity

The memory shakes me in awe, wets my eyes and everything. The mountains, their maple turrets, a pitch explosion against the stygian sky; me, thinner and faster then, barely fifteen, running downhill past masses of autumn olive. They call it “reborn” when you find Christ. I’m not sure it was Jesus I heard in the shrubbery, but the crickets’ chirps roared up like bubbles in a newborn’s throat and it occurred to me I’d unearthed true breath.

I’m not saved, but it was my second summer at Craig Springs, a Christian sleepaway camp, when I learned I irrevocably believe in God. It was a liminal epiphany, striking me as I returned in a fresh layer of deodorant from Monroe cabin to the Glass House, where the camp dance was winding down for Worship. The Monroe cabin bunks were unclear, in velvet shrouds. I was quick out the door. Next thing I remember is busted chucks smacking six times on steps. Then the wind started up, squalling my cheeks. I squinted and shivered, pieces of darkness pelleting my arms and thighs. Those God-ordained cricket chirpings swirled among Old Spice, wet

grass, dust, like Christ, risen off the gravel, pulsing sponge under fissured tree bark, hydrogen, rippling out of the immaculate tessellations I learned to call stars, ancient petrichore. The lights around camp swelled, and I heaved in the air around me. Pure life in my muscles, like communion wine—blood they drink for heaven.

When I arrived outside the Glass House, I told Will Henley I believed in God, and spirits and everything. He told me if I ever had questions about anything, I should ask him. He's very theological, and looks the part—square-faced, wire-rimmed glasses. I've never talked to him about God, though. The exchange was ages ago, but I haven't forgotten his offer. I'll take him up one day, having much to learn regarding the Lord, the ghosts that encircle Appalachia's Craig County, the bluer mountains farther east, the James, its fall line, its grand dilation to Chesapeake, brackish like how the line between Earth and sacrament is thinned when you pray, or watch constellations crest upon the zenith of a summer night.

I've never prayed enough, yet twice a week I find myself at the local Unitarian Universalist church. It's a great place to broaden your spiritual horizons, or just to sing, hold a stranger's hand, and gaze past the rafters. It's Sunday evening when I write this, so the voices of sanctuary are fresh in my throat. I had true breath this morning, like on the mountain. And last Wednesday, after our monthly potluck, I went to the memorial garden with my friend. Vehicles rushed toward the river, seen through drying azalea leaves. Wind spiraled with the oak above. In sleeves down to my knuckles, the wooden bench dug into my ribs. Light shown in the Carrillon's turret, a historical belltower in the heart of Richmond. For years, the building had been under renovation. It was good to see it lit.

Church members are strewn in ash over the mulch of this garden. Next spring, I'll bring part of the river for Water Communion, and pour my bottle into pitchers for the azalea blooms. Rivulets will drip out of gaps in the petals. That day, there were no pink flowers, and the shrubbery's hues reminded me of my Craig Springs epiphany. I breathed true, the taste of jambalaya still registering. The streetlamps melted into leaves and dust. I smiled at Fennec, and part of me resented the darkness, twilight now so fleeting as November presses on. I knew it was sacred, though, that we are sacred. The sun bestows summer every year. The darkness reveals the stars. The velvet cold suffocates the crickets, so new generations will rise, like Christ, out of the soil. I'll meet new ghosts. God falls out of the stars. Night remains holy.

NATALIA CORONADO-MERCER, GRADE II

Skinkers

Certain summers feel like small countries. Places you've lived once, ruled by sunburns, scraped knees, and the kind of freedom you don't recognize as freedom until years and years later. My nonnie's house was the capital of one of those summers. It sat just beyond the end of her gravel driveway, way deep in the woods, quiet and warm, the porch sagging just slightly like it was tired from holding the foundation of so many family memories. That's the place me my younger cousin, Maddy, learned the art of catching skinks; those quick, blue-tailed streaks that ruled the cracked concrete and mortar surrounding the fortress.

It always starts with a flash of cobalt, hits you like a reflector on a bike. "There!" Maddy exclaimed every time she saw one. She hollered for me because she knew, out of all the cousins, I was surely the best skinker (Granted, the only other cousin is her younger brother, who was 3 at the time). At the sound of her alarm, I'd run to get my net (if not already in my hand because are you a real skinker if you're not prepared?), see the skink, and 'Wham'" smack my net over the skink and surrounding radius.

Skinks are strange little things; sleek, fast, and so certain of their place in the world. They darted across the red brick steps like Secretariat at the derby. Maddy and I studied their moves, how they react to us, and react to our movement. We learned how they preferred the right side of the porch, and if they saw us coming, they'd run to a small slit under the guard rail, hiding in the center, how their bodies felt so fragile but confident,

intentional. We never hurt them; it was like an unspoken rule, sacred even. We just wanted to know them, to feel for a second that wild quickness running through our hands before letting them go.

After I'd scoop one up, we'd cup it up gently in the palm of our hands, and put it in one of our ready-made enclosures: a plastic tub, the base covered with grass, dirt, or leaves, sticks and rocks for them to climb on, an upside down chobani yogurt cup to hide under, water, and dead bugs. We kneel on the concrete and open our hands slowly, and watch as it walks around, inspecting the new, temporary environment. The skink would pause, deciding whether it trusted the world again, then slip away into the nearest patch of darkness. After a few minutes, we'd take all the necessities out of the bin and gently tip it over. The skink would run for the hills and into the grass or back under the guard rail.

I think those afternoons taught us something we didn't have words for: about gentleness, paying attention, and letting something go because you should. We never talked about it, kids rarely do, but I still think back and wonder if those skinks, tiny blue-tailed flickers of the world, were trying to teach me a lesson: hold it lightly, respect its wildness, and release it when the time comes.

KYLIE DANIEL, GRADE 10

Before Me

Excerpt

Warning: Mature Content

I am a product of hatred.

My mother's whole life has been like one of those trashy MTV shows I used to watch in secret. Her mother—my grandmother—worked multiple jobs. She moved my mom and uncle from one dingy motel room to the next, smoked cigarettes and let the scent linger beneath her nails. She didn't have time for her daughter. Much like her predecessor, my momma filled in the gaps with cigarettes and sex. She'd been desensitized to everything from a young age; to her mother, these habits were seen as pastimes.

I remember listening to Momma tell me bits and pieces of her childhood. She was a chubby, freckled red-head, and, according to her, that was the ugliest combination of the 90s. Little girls cackled and called her every word for fat their juvenile brains could think of. She only felt pretty when her mom dolled her up and took her out for double-dates with men twice her age. As she got older, her awkward ridges smoothed over, and the girls of her childhood came around. But the men were always there.

Not much is known about my father, except for the fact that he's a good liar. I see pictures of him as a kid once in a blue moon, whenever my mom decides to show me. We have the same ridge beneath our lips, the same rounded jawline. Sometimes I catch my mom's gaze lingering on my face too long. I always know why.

My parents met when my momma was eighteen. To her, he looked promising—tall, dark, intelligent, protective. He said he was twenty. She believed him. In him, she saw hope and stability. In her, he saw an easy target.

I tell people my father didn't stick around, but I know that's not entirely true. He still forces himself into my stream of consciousness. My momma once said I look exactly like my father during one of our arguments. Every once in a while, I search him up on Facebook and grieve over our striking resemblance. To me, he is calculated affection and explosive anger. The more I dwell on it, the more I realize the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. My anger scalds my cheeks. My promises are sporadically kept. Sometimes I find myself ready to hurt others to get what I want.

My mother is everything I hate about myself. We spill our guts to get what we want, and we explode when it doesn't work. Our tears grate against our waterlines; we are pretty only sometimes. The faults before me have become my own. Even during my happiest moments, there is a collision within me—father and mother, hunter and hunted, them and me.

NAUDIA DOWELL, GRADE 11

Michael and Jackson

It's the first day of third grade and I already know this boy is about to wreak havoc on my life. He walks through the double doors of the classroom and scans the baby blue cubbies for the one that has a frog sticker with "Jackson" written in Sharpie. I watch him and soak in the image of his curly brown-black hair, milk chocolate eyes curtained by long lashes, and tan complexion. He doesn't need to utter a single word; I'm already completely in love with him.

I study every one of his movements and interactions, searching for something I can use to my advantage. I begin to lose hope when all of the sudden he strikes a familiar pose. He's on his tip toes, knees bent, torso leaned forward with one hand by his side and the other on his head as if he's wearing a hat that he's tipping over his eyes. Michael Jackson's move! I can't believe it. Not only is this boy majestic, but he has good music taste too. At least, I know some of Michael Jackson's songs and like them enough that it constitutes a good music taste.

I beeline for him, the click clack of my ankle boots on the tile echoing throughout the classroom. Thank goodness I had dressed fashionably for the first day of school. My white, collared dress, thin pink belt, olive green boots, and thick black-framed glasses were sure to win him over. If that doesn't work, I'm sure my crooked teeth and stringy hair will do the trick. I open with a simple, "Do you like Michael Jackson?"

"Yes," he replies with a raised eyebrow and squinted eyes, skeptical.

"Me too!" I say. Boom, connection established.

"Cool." He says before briskly walking away.

Wow, we have so much in common. He's gonna fall in love with me, I just know it. I'll make it impossible for him not to. I'm about to become so knowledgeable about Michael Jackson that the only person who'd know more than me is the King of Pop himself.

Pick-up time can't come quicker. My dad needs to come get me so that I can put on my rose gold Beats headphones and absorb every single song Michael Jackson has ever released. I end up doing just that for weeks on end. I listen to albums, watch music videos, get CDs and vinyl, and read articles. I think it's also a sign of fate that the famous pop singer's last name is Jackson, which was the first name of the love of my life. While I drown myself in Michael Jackson related studies at night, I spend my days on the playground putting my not so subtle flirting skills to use. Mainly, I hang around Jackson while he plays basketball and compliment him even when he misses a shot, just to make sure he knows I'm supportive. As he dribbles the ball to the hoop on the blacktop, I tell him flat out that I like him and while he doesn't say anything about reciprocating those feelings, he doesn't run away, which is enough for me.

As third grade blurs into fourth, we become good friends. Word gets around that he likes me too, but he never admits it. There are little hints in the way he interacts with me that I think confirm it, like when he brought over a chair for me while we watched a movie for fun Friday, or when he smiled after I flat out said "I know you like me," (I'm not one to play coy). At this point, Michael Jackson is my favorite artist, and though I do actually like his music, he's my favorite primarily by association.

I fail to discover a musical personality outside of Michael Jackson for a while. I come home from school and my Mom's in the kitchen cooking and blasting music. I ask her what she's playing and she tells me it's an artist named Prince. I've heard of him before because he and Michael Jackson were musical rivals. Anyone that was Michael Jackson's enemy is mine, too.

"He's just a Michael Jackson wannabe." I say before walking away, leaving my mother rightfully offended and gobsmacked.

I make sure Jackson knows about my valiant effort of defending Michael Jackson's name against Prince. I walk into school Monday, ready to share the news. He's proud, but something in his face is off. I ask him what's going on. He looks me directly in the eyes and tells me he's leaving the school.

"Leaving the school? Forever?"

"Yeah, I leave at the end of the week," he says, a somber lilt to his tone.

This was not what was supposed to happen. I've made so much progress with him over the span of a year and a half just to have it all ripped away. What was the point of memorizing every lyric to every song on *Thriller* if Jackson was just going to leave anyways? I've never felt more heartbroken in my life.

It's the second to last day I have with Jackson. I walk into the lime green fourth grade classroom and hang my backpack on a hook in the closet like usual, but it feels different. Everything is changing and there's nothing I can do to stop it. I want today to drag on forever so that we'll never reach tomorrow and he'll never leave. Of course, time works in funny ways, so Thursday quickly turns to Friday just to spite me.

Everyone is acting normal, but how can they? Jackson's about to be gone forever. I only have eight hours left to let him know how much he really means to me. Recess comes and we sit together on the bench in the corner of the pebbled playground, shaded by a tree overhead, the Spring air still mostly chilly. I open my mouth to speak when I see his mom standing outside the front door of the school-building. What is she doing here? It's only halfway through the day, I'm supposed to have more time!

I watch in silence as Jackson's mom and the school administrator come and scoop him away. He turns and gives me a melancholic goodbye and I watch him walk to his mom's orange car that's parked in the street. They drive off and that's that. I'm absolutely gutted. The boy of my dreams is now just a piece of the past.

To cope, I listen to Michael Jackson, but as months pass, I start to branch out towards other musicians. I even listen to his musical arch nemesis, Prince. Since Jackson's not around anymore, I don't have to worry about impressing or disappointing him. So, I put on *Purple Rain* and something awakens inside of me. I've never heard something like this before. His songs are so unique and vibrant. They have a mystical air to them that I can't describe. The sound of Prince's electric guitar quickly becomes one of my favorite sounds on the planet. I start to realize that I really like Prince, even more so than Michael.

I feel guilty, like I'm betraying Jackson. Of course I still love Michael's music, I always will, but I feel naturally drawn to Prince. I don't need an incentive to study his whole discography or watch all of his music videos. As years pass, I become a bigger Prince fan and move on from being that ten year old girl clutching onto her *Off the Wall* vinyl. My shelves become stacked with various albums ranging from Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* to Mariah Carey's *Butterfly*. My music taste becomes a sort of quilt sewn together by the tastes of others. The first stitch happens to come from the boy I liked in third and fourth grade. If it weren't for him, I might not have asked my parents about 80's music. I might not have evolved from 80's pop and new wave to 70's rock and 90's R&B.

Whenever Michael Jackson comes on, I laugh thinking about how obsessed and persistent I used to be. Even though Jackson's become nothing more than a memory, his influence on my musical journey is forever solidified in my Spotify playlists, records, and CDs. Jackson gave me Michael Jackson, with Michael Jackson came Prince, and with Prince came a rabbit hole of retro music that would soon define my music taste and who I am as a person. I find my angst in the riffs of Lindsey Buckingham's guitar and my joy in Madonna's pop songs. I feel peace in Tame Impala's basslines and melancholy in the strummed guitar laments of The Smiths. My musical preferences and personality are the result of a domino effect tracing all the way back to Michael and Jackson.



TAYLOR FLOWERS, GRADE II

Turtle-Tail Tides

The overpowering smell of salt had become routine, background, but always there was the reminder of how close the ocean had been kept. Those days brought and the sun ripe the morning from orange to blue, my parents, both of them in the kitchen. The smell of toast ready and jellied and set on paper plates with cartoon dolphins swimming still through the smears, I'd eat quickly, fearing I'd miss the migrating moment where the doors would slide shut and my little hands would just be able to reach the handle but unable to undo the lock.

Today, I made it, The cream concrete was lit, warm under the sun, the pool and its even lighter perimeters glistening with glares that made me squint, but not enough to make me miss that long blue pole with the white cap held by my father, the rest disappearing into the water. He'd guide the long pole through the water, rippling it starting in the middle in circles that spread all the way to the edges.

I came close to the edge, enough to see into the pool but far enough to keep from falling into it. I saw then where the rest of the pole went, way in the deep end of the pool, where it slowly caught in its net a dark, slow swimming thing. The net rose from the water. Dripping within its lines was a turtle. I didn't get to look at it long before my dad turned with the pole; and dumped it under the small opening under the fence.

The next moments were packaged eternities of searching greeneries behind the binds of silver fences, collecting dirt and grit from the rocks my hands could reach, but beyond the large leaves, rocks and sand dipping down the slope into more water, barely beyond my reach, there was the plain fact that the turtle was gone, just as my dad was, and so was my way back into the house without my mom knowing.

I reached for the handle on the door, and made an attempt to tug it, but nothing slid open. I pressed my nose flat against the glass and squinted into the door's window, slamming my hands against the glass once, then again, and one more time. When I pulled my face away, the door was stamped with small handed prints of dirt, I squealed before covering my mouth with the same dirty hands. Going back inside now would've been like walking towards somebody made shark in a game of sharks and minnows. Things would still be fun, but still slightly less fun as the shark. If she found me outside my mother would've scooped me into her arms and held me against her chest, and I'd fumble with her braids until it felt like forever, and I'd be too scared to free myself and fall out of her arms to the floor, even if it meant freedom. So I stayed outside, away from the view of the window doors and near the walls of the house and by the fence and out with the pool with that salted chlorine and earthy scent.

When things pass so many times, I think it makes you brave. Outside, it'd been forever, forever forever forever. The sun and its heat wasn't nice now in the way it sizzled inside my skin when at first it sat on it. And all it must've meant that my parents went to the store and forgot about me, and just being out of sight made it that easy: I'd forgotten about the turtle the same way the leaves had now forgotten about the shade, the same leaves that could still hide the turtle in some shade of dark green and that maybe if I hadn't tried to get a look at it for so long I could have been with my parents, away from the chlorine, sun, and fences. By that point I'd been all over the backyard, all over the fence, where my dad let the long pole rest until I tried to pick it up and it fell over. I'd been where it all was, except for the pool. When it'd been so long, the fear of slipping into its waters turned less and less into a fear, I'd put my foot on its opaque perimeters until I was at the edge and looking down the sides. The water was clear, glistening and beautiful all except for how it smelled.

Coming to the side with the steps, I dipped my foot in, it was a cool release from the heat, a deliverance that welcomed the rest of me up to my neck in the water. I knew then how kind the cold could be. I squinted up in the air, the tips of my toes being just enough to keep my face above the water rippling with my new presence. Staring up, the sky was clear and blue, and everything was nice again. The chlorine, the turtle, the sun, my parents being gone, this new weightlessness, this floating. I sat in it forever, but it didn't feel like forever enough; I breathed easy, the easiest I could ever but for this feeling as I drifted, now more on my back than before. My limbs stayed limp, but if my lungs were full, I knew I'd stay above and in the water without struggle.

It was just when I was about to find out what sinking was that my mother slid the door open, and before I turned my head her bright yellow dress was crashing into the pool. I'd come off my back to doggy paddle to her, but she'd already had me in her reach within a few strokes. She hauled me from the pool, heaving worried breaths while I only giggled in her arms in a way that only relieved her further.

"Joe! You need to watch your son! He almost drowned!" she yelled into the hallways past the door. She looked at me. "You better not do that again, that was bad. Bad." and from then on, I was never allowed back into the pool without a vest.

ALLAN JAMES, GRADE II

Work Ethic

Sometimes I wonder if the chase of it all is what keeps me going. Each time i buy the thing I swore would make me happier, that feeling just fades away. Maybe it's all about the addiction to wanting. Wanting is exciting, having is quiet, and done. Then im just working for the next dollar, or for something bigger. Or not, who knows. Years ago, I lived in a box. Not a cardboard box on the side of a busy street in Manhattan. Not one floating down the river with no way of knowing where's next. A box under a house inhabited by people I didn't know, and that didn't know me. Inside the box was a bed, a TV, and 2 desks. One desk for me, and the other for my dad. We lived there for a long time. See, my dad had just come back to the States after being trapped in Barbados. It was cramped in that box, and we slept on the same bed. Ate at our desks because there wasn't such a thing as a dinner table. But despite all that. Even in those horrible living conditions. He still kept me happy.

KALIL KNIGHT, GRADE II

Smile

I met my third grade teacher on my eighth birthday, at the end of summer when the fall season was approaching. I remember because of a selfie I took with my mom where I had beads in my hair and a name tag on my shirt, holding up a peace sign. I was climbing the elementary school ladder and entering a new hallway: the hallway for the older kids; the hallway for third grade and up.

My teacher's name was Mrs. Edwards. She was short, caramel-skinned, and frequently wore her hair in a slick back bun. She was also on the older side and spoke sophisticatedly like those in black-and-white movies did.

Her classroom was bee-themed and very organized. There was a bookshelf full of children's books, colored bins for notebooks of different subjects, and a gigantic rug laid before the smart board. On the first day, we received a bag of Honeycomb cereal—tying into the bee theme.

I was a shy kid, awkward and frequently consumed by a certain hesitancy. Oftentimes, I didn't know what to say or if I was good enough to say anything at all. I was pretty bad when it came to making friends. Usually, someone made it easy for me by talking to me first or literally dragging me along with them. I didn't talk much.

For a girl like me, it's unusual not to talk. I'm Black with features that make me stand out in a crowd almost immediately. I was supposed to be bold, brash even, but was quite the opposite: timid and unsure of myself.

At the beginning of the school year, Mrs. Edwards didn't quite like me. If I didn't make eye contact, I was rolling my eyes. If I didn't say much when she spoke to me, I had a problem with her. When I struggled with following directions, I was being defiant.

It wasn't until she knew my grandma worked at the school that she treated me differently. My grandma was a janitor. I often saw her sitting on a chair by the exit door in the cafeteria during lunch time. My teacher knew my grandma through my uncle who was a well-known organist, vocalist, and pianist in the area. She was a part of the choir when she attended VSU, so it made sense that they connected through music.

She started being more understanding towards me and extended her hand when I needed extra help. It was strange how fast her switch-up was, but I was just glad the conflict was over.

My favorite school subject has always been English. I already know the language, and it's fun putting words together for a story and acing spelling bees. I excelled at English in the third grade. I was probably the best in Mrs. Edwards's class.

I wrote a lot in my spare time too. I wrote stories on paper and stapled them together as books, and sometimes, I pretended I was famous and wrote acknowledgements at the end of them.

I rarely wrote poetry, but at my after-school program we were assigned writing folders and when I wanted to pass the time one day, I wrote a poem. It was about the upcoming winter season. I wrote about cocoa, snowflakes, mittens, and holiday cheer. Every other line rhymed because that was the fun of it.

I didn't intend for anyone to read it, but the director of the after-school program showed it to my teacher. They reacted like I was William Shakespeare and I was awfully confused.

"It's just a poem," I thought.

"It's not even that good."

"I didn't ask her to share that."

My teacher wanted to hang it on the corkboard in the third grade hallway and I looked at her stunned. Anxiety climbed up my shoulders and down my chest.

I didn't want my poem displayed in the third grade hallway. In fact, I didn't want my poem to be read, period. But when my teacher asked if she could hang it up, I said yes. After all, if she thought it was good, it couldn't have been that bad.

After the poem was displayed, no kid came up to me and complimented me on how amazing my poem was. Just as I thought: another mediocre poem written by a mediocre girl.

I didn't think that I was cool or amazing or very smart. Sure, I had good friends at my after-school program, but I didn't see them elsewhere, and it seemed when I didn't have a toy in my hand or a game to play, no one liked me that much anyway. I was losing my stability, my confidence, and even my friends, then my grandma died too.

I no longer saw her during lunch time. She was taken away and I didn't know how to feel. For most of my life, I wasn't a fan of my grandma. I still remember wishing death on her as I sat on her floor. Devilish. And now, I wasn't going to play a round of Candy Land with her ever again.

Lunch time started feeling like a quiet place. I had people to sit with and wasn't hated, but no matter what, I always felt alone. I was too much of a goody-two-shoes, but I was also too bad. I was too studious, but I was also too dumb. I wasn't enough or I was too much. Sitting at the end of the lunch table grew on me.

In the Bible, Rebekah wanted Jacob to have the blessing instead of Esau. She prepared a meal she knew his father would like and gave him a coat that smelled like his brother. It was a lie, a dirty lie, but she believed in him. Teachers aren't supposed to give gifts to their students. It breaks the code. But as I was sitting alone at lunch one day, Mrs. Edwards brought me a basket filled with all sorts of stuff—candy, snacks, stationery...

She asked me, "Do you know why I'm giving this to you?"

My grandma died. Of course. But I said, "I don't know" and she laughed.

I didn't like that I was someone to laugh at, but I was also someone to consider, gift, and display in the third grade hallway.

I was important.

In the sixth grade, Mrs. Edwards gave me gifts for my eleventh birthday. Among those gifts was a notebook and on its front page she wrote that I was beautiful and encouraged me to keep writing. When I was younger, I didn't know how to appreciate kind gestures. I thought her calling me beautiful was a lie and when I received the notebook, I hadn't been writing as much. After all, writing wasn't as encouraged anymore and I spent most of my time binging junk food, playing the Sims 4, and watching YouTube. But it made me feel special that I mattered to her after all those years.

As I got more praise in middle school, I started believing that I actually was a good writer. My English teacher gave me a gift card for my performance, I won a school-wide poetry contest, and in the eighth grade, I was accepted into a performing arts school as a writing major.

Mrs. Edwards told me I was something and that is what I became. She is one of the gentle hands that molded me into who I am.

There are other hands. For example, for a long time, I thought I was hideous and should hide from the world, so I hid behind a facial mask and sunglasses. In school, I was called gay for reasons I don't know, so I believed them. Children my age laughed at me a lot, so I believed no one would ever take me seriously.

But even though there were little loving hands in my life, they are what I remember most. I remembered Mrs. Edwards the day I almost dropped out of school. I thought of the things she wrote, said, and how her dialogue matched her actions. She was a godly woman, and as I stood out, she did too.

Mrs. Edwards wasn't like the other teachers. She was old school, her classroom was a floor higher than all the other third grade classrooms, and she was the only teacher who cooked breakfast before the SOL tests. When she came on stage for a school-wide assembly, she received the least amount of claps. A lot of students saw her as vile and mean. But her students—my classmates—saw another side of her face. Mrs. Edwards was cool. Mrs. Edwards was kind. Mrs. Edwards was funny. She didn't see as everyone else saw and didn't act as everyone else acted and that was a good thing.

She saw a different side of my face too. She believed in me when no one else would.

I thought my winter poem was miniscule in the grand scheme of things and didn't deserve to be hung up on the wall. I also thought when she took me out of class that I wasn't pretty enough to be in her photo, but she guided me to my poem anyway, titled "Winter."

She told me to smile and I heard my crush laughing in the background. His teacher's classroom door was open and I looked at him and assumed he was laughing at me. But there are times in our lives when we have to choose which hands we're going to give our attention to—the gentle ones or the rough ones—and that day, I chose to look towards Mrs. Edwards and smile.

ADORA MCCOY, GRADE 12

Zoey

Zoey (zouhwee) Proper Noun - Life, prosperous: November 11, 2008 this name was given to me by my mother, Crystal Shontell McFadden.

My name means life. And combined with my twin's name, our names mean the lord has remembered to give us life.

Since a young age I was someone who loved to talk. Everywhere I went I left with a friend. My younger years consisted of slight problems like what boy I wanted to like next, or the anger of my mom picking out my clothes and dousing my face in vaseline. Since i was able to be coherent my mom made sure i had a plan in life, what did i want to be, What did i expect for myself? These are the questions that every child should be thinking of. I watched a lot of Doc McStuffins and Pj Masks, so a doctor or a super hero; and being a nurse was all that in one. Being a nurse was always in my heart, my momma always told me I have a nurturing spirit, it was in our blood. With her being a teacher, and her great grandma being the help she knew i was destined to help people. when she watched me playing with my dollbabies, she knew that no matter what I did it would be from love and care.

Many times in my life, I've felt out of place, unplanned, lazy, and unhelpful. And although my life may not move like I envisioned , I'm still growing and blossoming. And I know, whenever I feel outside of my positive

self I always peer into that little place in my mind, where I hear my momma, and all my loved ones cheering me on, and loving me in anything I do. The world is my oyster, and I cannot wait to dive in.

ZOEY ANTOINETTE MCFADDEN, GRADE II

Personal Narrative

It was mid-July. Fat, dark mosquitoes swarmed at my swollen ankles, fighting for my blood. I had never had so many bites in my life. The welts were huge, the size of my pinky finger's pad, and harbored a ripe pink color, the sores raised as if they were sure to burst.

Dusk was falling in orange sheets, but the air stayed thick and sultry. We'd always complain, but now, I find myself looking back at our digital camera pictures, wishing it could be that humid again.

I was lying in the damp moss beside Henry, a boy I had known since 7th grade but only met twice. He was always my best friend for 3 weeks of summer.

Then, we were silent, watching a jagged spruce's limbs shimmy with the crescendoing wind. Our silence was rare. Henry's voice is this high-pitched shriek, and he can talk forever. We were normally the loudest of all, but we were tired. We'd already worn out every topic, anyway. Trekking through the high grasses, by the stream, and the rocky trail, we'd already covered our first loves (his was Henry Conrad, mine was Elise), the plot of *Yellowjackets*, his friends at home, and his mom.

Our backs were wet with sweat, our hair slicked to our heads, our feet throbbing. We'd been walking all day through the West Virginian mountains, and had ended up back at the entrance to Spruce Knob Forest. We were to sleep in there for one last night, by the parking lot where we would be picked up and taken back to our cabins back at camp.

The sturdy trees towered upon us, the fertile, warm soil bursting with life underneath us, fat ants scurrying, a scintillating dragonfly perched on a nearby stump. The cool mountain air whispered through the canopies above and we were barefoot. Our boots sat idly by the fire. I understood how close I was to the smallness of the earth, that warm, safe center of it, where earthworms burrow and rabbits dig. I was always stricken by how quiet it could get in the woods. The only sound was the land and our voices.

Our counselor, Ellie, who I had known since I was a 2nd grader, stood from her spot on the ground.

"You guys can go out and watch the sunset while we wait for this to boil," she said, wiping her hands on her shorts. Henry and I shot up. "Finally," he said, and ran up to tell the others.

Henry, Sanai and James and I started down the trail. James led the way. He was a Boy Scout and always wore a yellow hardhat. He liked to jump out from behind trees at night and tell stories from home about a girl named Cee. Summer was all about stories. It always has been. That night, the topic was the sewer tunnels he'd found.

"So, I'm going down there, and then I realize there's this other tunnel. It opens up into this room with knee-high water, you know, and.."

"That's disgusting. You're swimming in [crap]," I laughed.

"They're not sewers, they're storm drains, Iris," He said. "The water is completely clean."

"You're nasty," said Sanai. The night before she'd told me she thought he was cute. I made eyes at her, and she grinned. I'd known Sanai since I was 8. She wore her hair in long Dutch braids and was always in tank tops.

"So, I took this rock and I drew on the walls this big bird." James was saying.

"Why would you do that??" Henry scoffed. He hated James. Last summer they'd kissed in the woods, and I was the only one who knew about it. Henry and I were like that. It was strange. We only knew each other for 3 weeks out of the year, yet he knew me as no one else did, what I had done, what I had wanted to do, and I knew him with this same intensity.

“So if anyone else came down there and tried to mess with it, they’d get scared and think it was a cult, like, headquarters or something, so they wouldn’t touch my area.” James etched the bird in the loose soil underfoot with his steel-toed boot.

“That’s stupid.” Sanai said, smiling silly.

We came to the parking lot we would be pulling out of early the next morning. It was devoid of cars. The neatly drawn white lines glimmered, the asphalt sparkling. The sky was endless, falling into sultry oranges, then a fluffy pink, a pale lavender. The clouds were enormous, too, tinged pastel, and stretching high above in wonky shapes. The sun gleamed mad orange, low, retreating. From where we stood at the mouth of the parking lot we could see the sloping edge of the mountain, the ebb where the blue-dark Shennandoah unfurled beneath us.

“[Shoot],” said Henry. He was staring up, his eyes huge. “That looks like a puzzle.”

“You look like a puzzle,” James jeered. His grin showcased a wide, dark gap at his two front teeth.

“[Shut up].” Henry snapped and rolled his eyes. He grabbed my arm and led me away.

We continued walking through the parking lot and towards the lookout. The air was crisp, chilly, and blue. I hugged myself, frosty in my damp T-shirt and shorts, and walked beside Sanai. We all listened to her account of her ex-boyfriend, Jaiden. “We never said I love you,” she was saying.

“Hmm,” Henry said. “Do you regret it?” I elbowed him.

“You’re messy!” I whispered. We giggled, breathy and short.

“We would always just say, ‘smell ya later.’” She said, “It was dumb.

“We’ve all done stupid stuff when we like people.” I said. I thought of seventh grade, ninth grade, the summer I’d left behind, but all of that was so far away then. None of it could touch me. Everything back home—my big sister, my new lover—seemed like a phantasmic dream, a life I watched on TV and critiqued from my sofa.

“Yeah.” We were silent as the sky grew closer, seeming to descend. We were only ever that quiet in church, the shrine back at main camp. At home, I guess I believed in God, but at camp, I became part of Him. I slept with a rosary. Those days hiking in the woods, we sang church songs. The night before this one, we’d been swimming in the river. I performed pretend baptisms, dribbling the sweet, clear water at dirt-streaked foreheads, murmuring prayer.

That evening, dusk was hazy pink, like pulled and dyed cotton glued to a multicolored canvas. Everything was so docile, still, as if the ground was holding its breath. I heard rustling from the trees nearby, those that were sharp-leaved and towering. In unison, we froze.

Suddenly, an animal leaped from the dense, green forest, its long, slim legs extended. I gasped. Perhaps it was the bright ivory tunnels of light, the sort of light that cascades pale and buttery when day is dying, but I swear it was a white doe. Her fur was shining, her snout glistening, her black hooves planted right in front of us. I could’ve reached out and touched her ridged rib. I could’ve stroked her forehead, the tuft of hair growing between her furry ears. Her eyes were dark, liquid, as if she knew something I never would.

“Oh my god,” Sanai whispered. “Nobody move.” We all held still, beholding the miracle of this spindly, long-legged animal alight before us, our breath catching in our throats. Sanai reached out her hand towards the deer. It was quivering, centimeters away from the holy skin. I brought my hand to my mouth. I was fully expecting the deer to spring away, back into the damp safety of the woods, but she did not. She stayed there with her black-rimmed eyes, those long lashes. I still remember Sanai’s hand, suspended in time, reaching out for something she couldn’t touch, her fingers extended in front of all of us, so close to the divine. I felt something legendary, something strong and holy, a sanctified force rising up around us, something on that mountain broken off and stuffed inside each of our chests like Communion bread.

The shining deer took one look at all of us—lanky, gawking, half-grown mortals running their mouths—with her beautiful eyes, and then she fled into the twilight, her bright-white glimmer disintegrating into the forest beyond.

IRIS MCFARLANE, GRADE 10

Peeling Shrimp

I smell the shrimp before I see it: an unfamiliar odor, damp and fishy, with an edge of salt. My father, who lost his sense of smell a few years ago, is oblivious to it, but as he brings me into the garage, it almost bowls me over on the wooden stairs. On the concrete floor is an open cooler housing hundreds of shrimp. Each one needs to be peeled and deveined for sale.

Forget the smell. I'm glad for a chance to help him. He seems to never need my help, or at least he needs mine less often than I need his. Of course, I shouldn't be upset at it. He works the night shift at a cigarette plant, so he spends much of my time mending things alone, without the help of a child. Still, at twelve years old, I badly want to be needed. Worst of all, on the rare chance he does want an assistant, his first choice is my brother, Matthew, a year younger than me but already proving himself to be more of an outdoorsman, a mechanic, a helper.

But Matthew was not who he chose this morning. Matthew is asleep now. As I unfold a lawn chair in front of the cooler, I think about how I can brag about this to him, but once I sit, I remember that I shouldn't be too smug: I don't know how to prepare a shrimp or what deveining is. Does my father even know? After all, he isn't a fisherman. (In fact, he bought these shrimp cheap from a coworker, so that he might sell them prepared and at a higher price. He is always saving, scrimping, scheming for more money to get us by; he sells his plasma every Sunday and bears the bandaged elbow to prove it.) Twelve is an age for doubting parents, with and without reason. I am wondering if my father is winging it.

But he knows, of course. Sitting beside me, he says, "Washed your hands?"

I say yes, lying. "Did you wash yours?"

He holds up his hands, two slabs of clay, calloused and creased, covered with handiwork bruises, knuckles hard and round as wooden spools. They've been washed. One of these hands dips into the cooler and grabs the tail of a shrimp and holds it to my face. The shrimp is the color of snow in a parking lot. Its eyes bulge from its barbed head, a pair of bright black Christmas ornaments. With his other hand my father pulls a fork out of his pocket, swiped from the kitchen.

"First we cut its head off," he says.

He cups the shrimp in his hand and brings down the fork, a guillotine blade that severs its neck. The decapitation is effortless. Pinching a tendril, he flings its head onto the floor. Poking out of the sliced shell is a circle of pale meat, and in the middle of the circle is a gravel-colored fleck, the vein that needs to be pulled out.

"How come?" I say.

"It's full of crap," he says. "Digestive tract. Now you get your fork and put it in where the vein is. Then you slice up. That gets rid of the shell and lets you at the vein."

One of the fork tines pierce the meat and, as he pulls his hand up, slits the top of the shell, which he drops. Now, with the tine, he draws out the long fine thread of grit.

"Here you go," he says. "A bracelet."

I pull a face of disgust. For the first time today, my father smiles. He hands me the fork and heads inside for another, and a bowl to collect the ones we've prepared.

"How many're we peeling?" I say.

“How many do you see? Alright, it’s your turn now. I’ll guide you.” I palm a shrimp, cool as a river stone. “That’s right,” he says. “Cut the head off. There we go, into the pile. Fork goes right there,” and so on, until I’ve gotten the hang of it.

Now I peel, and he peels. The piles of veins and shells rise. The smell of shrimp loses its sting. Every so often, I glance up to see how my father is doing it, his swift economic motions. Soon enough, our hands are moving in the same patterns, though his are larger, older, battered. Without saying so, we turn our work into a race, concentrating, cutting with less care. I do want to win, but another part of me hopes that the race goes on for longer, that there are more shrimp somewhere else, in his truck or waiting at the plant, so that this moment between us can linger. But the time must come when the bowl overflows, when we pour the shrimp into the cooler again, when my father and I throw out what we cut off.

Once the cooler is loaded in the truck, we sit in the lawn chairs. Noon has come. Jackson might be awake. I ask my father where the shrimp is going, though I know the answer. He mulls over this for a moment and says, “Some of it’ll be sold, or we’ve done this for nothing. Then, I might save some for Grandpa. It was him who taught me how to do this in the first place.”

Now I can see, for a brief moment, a scene from years ago. A young boy and his father are together in a different garage, with a different cooler, with different shrimp. They sit at similar angles, holding forks like whittling knives, tossing shells over their shoulders, speaking without words. The boy looks up now and then to see how to do it; the father does the same, to see how his son is faring. Their gazes never meet at the same time, but they both have the sense to slow down their work, to prolong the moment. With each shrimp peeled, the boy feels the smell of shrimp recede from his nose.

JOSHUA MCPEAK, GRADE 12

The Beginning of the Great Animostic Vendetta

For the sake of fiction, we will assume Harker is an ordinary name. The way Harper might be an ordinary name, and Javier is too, for this story will explain the rivalry between the two lads.

For the sake of fiction, you have to believe me when I tell you, this story doesn’t start with Harker and Javier. It begins with the ancient tribes of Hark and Jave, who shared an island called Geon (pronounced “Geen” or “Goon”, depending on whether you’re feeling edgy). For the geography buffs out there, Geon Island was located off the south coast of Russia. It is no longer there.

Geon Island was split down the middle by a flag placed directly in the center; each tribe lived peacefully and respectfully. That was until one day. Let me tell you about this one day. This day was the day of a wedding.

Matrimony was not taken very seriously on Geon Island, for it happened, ended, and repeated so often. The ceremony, on the other hand, was taken as seriously as a heart attack (this feels like the best comparison).

To prevent any chance of dispute between the Hark and Jave tribes, they never crossed the border. That was, until a Hark married a Jave, which later proved to be a ploy to discreetly move the flag; it ended in a one-sided divorce.

A Hark engaging in matrimony to a Jave was never heard of and therefore frowned upon, but when have opinions ever hindered love? The mother of the bride (a Hark) and the mother of the groom (a Jave) go into a Dis-Battle during the reception, during which the mother of the bride told the mother of the groom, “Your lineage is adequate.”

Now you might be thinking, *this is what has caused the century-old feud and contention?* No. There is more. It happened on another day. Let me tell you about this day.

On Geon Island, there are trees (shockingly), and upon these trees grow Berries of Goen. Pay attention to the letter switch there; the prehistoric Geons were really creative. The Berries of Goen require an intense

process of harvest and an even more intense process of juicing. As such a valuable member of the ancient Hark tribe, an innovative young juvenile by the name of Natarkia invented a Berry of Goen juicer. Natarkia's life-altering invention piqued the interest of Harks and Javes island-wide, especially an adolescent Jave by the name of Juliave, who asked to borrow the juicer. You might imagine where this leads.

Juliave returned the Berry of Goen juicer intact, but only spiritually. I imagine you can imagine that this set Geon technology back so many years that the island ceased to exist, and now the long-standing, mutual rivalry between the Hark and Jave cultures remains in whoever is left. So, to answer your question, this is why Harker and Javier are mortal enemies in the present day.

HARPER PERCIVAL, GRADE 10

Donatello

Ever since I was little, I loved watching movies and cartoons of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Many reboot series and movies were made, splitting into alternate universes rather than continuing one cohesive plot. I watched the originals and adored them. My brother and I would take our plastic ninja weapons—I had Raphael's sai; I can't recall what he had—and put on our matching bandanna masks—I had red to match Raph, of course, and he donned Leonardo's blue—and together we'd "fight crime" as the turtle brothers would on screen. Of course, we were practically toddlers, so there wasn't much skill involved in our playing. But we'd have our fun, launching ourselves against the couch and brandishing plastic weapons, more than likely turning on each other halfway through our fight. Being older and bigger, I'd win, but that doesn't mean he wouldn't put up a decent fight.

I'll be the first to admit that one of my major obsessions is the Ninja Turtles, no matter what rendition they're in. I've got almost every movie in the TMNT franchise on DVD, a few comic books, a Ninja Turtles game for my Nintendo Switch, and even two VHS tapes with some episodes of the original cartoon on them. I used to talk non-stop about ninja turtles, and that obsessiveness didn't stop; it just shifted into something more private because I had already said just about everything there was to say out loud.

Amongst all the other turtles, Donatello sticks out, especially in the 2018 version of TMNT, Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. That version of him mirrors all the parts of me that aren't meant to be there. The parts that cause judgment.

Having a hard time talking about feelings has a tendency to be shown in cold, careless villains who couldn't give a hoot about anyone. Yet Donatello still cares; he just doesn't show it in a traditional way. Getting grossed out or bothered by things others don't mind is seen as dramatic and bratty. But when he gets grossed out, other characters have empathy. Some people refuse to believe rude tones are capable of being accidental. Donatello has to clarify his intentions sometimes, but it's understood that he's not choosing to sound disrespectful. That's just what his voice sounds like. If you're really passionate about something, you're officially considered a nerd. A weirdo. Maybe a few lighthearted jokes are made, but at the end of the day the other characters accept Donatello not despite his interests, but because they're part of who he is.

Again and again, these traits are seen as annoying or ill-meaning. Then there's Donatello. A hero. He quite literally saved the world—multiple times at that. He's still himself in the sense that he still has his quirks, but the writers don't pair a person like him with horrid morals or mockery. I mean, he is a mutant turtle, which is pretty weird, but there are all sorts of mutants in the TMNT universe, so it cancels out. The point is, people around Donatello don't see him as something inherently bad. For someone like me in the real world, it means a lot to see someone similar to myself doing good.

JOLENE WATTS, GRADE 12

Buchanan County Public Library Homeschool Class

Easy Chocolate Chip Cookies

½ cup of butter
½ cup of sugar
¼ cup of brown sugar
2 tsp of vanilla
1 large egg

1 ¾ cup of all purpose flour
½ tsp baking soda
½ tsp kosher salt
1 cup of chocolate chips

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Melt butter in a large bowl. Add sugar. Stir in vanilla and egg. Add flour and baking soda. Stir in chocolate chips. Scoop ½ table spoon and place 2 inches apart on a baking sheet. Bake for 7 to 10 minutes. Enjoy.

JAXON CRABTREE, GRADE 6

The Disney Trip

There once was a family that went to Disney World. They rode Space Mountain and went to EPCOT and rode Guardians of the Galaxy. It went 50 mph and the test track went 85 mph. Then they rode the Tower of Terror. It went 199 feet in the air and dropped at the end.

ELIJAH GOODMAN, GRADE 4

Three Little Lions

Once upon a time there were three little lions. The lions were little and babies. But, they grew bigger and bigger and bigger.

Then when they were big and strong a zoo catcher caught them. On the way to the zoo, the lions didn't know where they were going. They were scared. The oldest lion busted the cage door down and the lions escaped.



Library homeschool class

The zoo catcher went out to find the lions. Once he found the lions he was extra prepared. He caught them in a stronger cage. This time it worked!

The cage was stronger than the lions. The lions rested in the cage wondering where they were going.

Finally, they stopped moving. “Where were they,” the lions wondered. Then something loaded up the cage and put them on a big bird.

The lions were flying so they laid back down to rest. They rested for what seemed like years. Finally they stopped. The lions stood up wondering why they stopped. The people took the lions off the big bird. The zoo catcher loaded them in his truck. They finally arrived at their destination. The lions were looking around at all of the other animals. The lions were let out of their cages. Only to discover they were in a huge cage! They tried to jump out but couldn’t escape. The lions found a huge rock and rested on it. They made it their new home and called it Pride Rock. They all grew to love it. So they lived happily ever after.

KALEB GOODMAN, GRADE 2

Off to Neverland

Wendy, John, and Micahel are waiting on Peter Pan and Tinker Bell to pick them up from their home but Peter Pan did not make it because Tiger Lily is missing. So, Peter Pan sends the lost boy to get them. Wendy started to worry about them. But just then the lost boy showed up and Tiger Lily was found and they all went back to Neverland.

LACY GOODMAN, GRADE 6

My Brother and Me

Brenley
beautiful, nice
talking, climbing, swinging
school, builder, crafter, dancer
gaming, caring, snoring
handsome, thoughtful
Brooks

BRENLEY PALMER, GRADE 5

The Fisherman and the Trout

There was a fisherman who went trout fishing one morning. First, he hooked a brown trout. But it got off. Dang! That would have tasted good. Twenty minutes later, he hooked a rainbow trout.

I declare, I am about done, said he. Then he hooked the one! The Gold Arch trout. He hurried and put it in the net, but the trout said, “See you later, sucker!” He threw his pole into the water and walked away, very, very mad.

The moral of this story: Many people will give up before they get their supper.

Inspired by: The Fox and the Grapes (Aesop’s Fables)

BROOKS PALMER, GRADE 7

The Mouse and the Squid

Mr. Mouse is swimming on a warm spring day. A rock hit the poor mouse, knocking him out. This caused him to fall into the bottom of the ocean. He landed on a squid that was resting on a sunken ship. The squid said, “I am Mr. Squid,” and I am Mr. Mouse.

Out of nowhere comes an Orca to eat the mouse. The squid jumps into action and sprays that mean Orca with ink. The squid fights all of the other Orcas. He takes the little mouse and puts him back on shore.

The moral of the story is that you may be a new creature in a strange place, but there are good creatures there to help you.

Inspired by Aesop's Fable-The Lion and the Mouse.

GRAYSON PALMER, GRADE 3

Building A Snowman

On a chilly, cold night
It's a winter wonderland outside.
It's a place I can go to use my snowman guide.
I started building my huge snowballs
He is building up so very tall.
I get my scarf with white and red stripes.
My nose starts to run, so I got some wipes.
I came back and got him a black hat.
Then I thought, maybe I should get him a rain hat.
Right before I finished I gave him his orange nose.
Finally it's time to go in because I have a freezing nose

KATIE BETH PALMER, GRADE II

Sideshow: A Story

Growing up I knew that living in a big city was different from living on Kennel Branch. I knew they had clear water, whereas our water was orange from sulfur. I knew that they had subways and yellow taxi cabs that raced them around the city, whereas our family had a 1970 VW van, which could only get over 35 mph going downhill and still wasn't quite big enough to carry our family of nine. What I didn't know was that what entertained us was so different from them.

We had television, even if it came from a satellite that took up most of our backyard and had to be cranked into position to change the channel. We watched Days of Our Lives, Dallas and the Cosby Show like everyone else. It was the entertainment that we left the house for that made us different.

By the 1980s, big cities became too cultured and sophisticated to appreciate the carnival sideshows that had been a staple of American entertainment for generations. New York City and San Francisco abandoned the performers for the opera and exhibits of modern art, much of which resembled the aftermath of an emergency trip to a gas station bathroom.

The people of Appalachia, on the other hand, still embraced the Lobster Boy, Tiny Tommy, the world's smallest man and the bearded lady. Though, I'm pretty sure my great-aunt Esther had her beat by a whisker.

Throughout my childhood the carnival and the sideshow performers would come through the area and our whole community would come out for the greasy food, the completely unsafe rides, and the rigged games that we couldn't resist.

Seeing how the sideshow acts seemed to inspire such a spending frenzy, Eddie Tiller, the owner of Tiller's Supermarket, decided to hire one of the carnival's biggest attractions, Jimbo the Wrestling Bear, for a special Saturday event at his store. To build excitement for the event, he offered any housewife who stayed in the ring with Jimbo for more than 3 minutes \$100 in groceries.

My Daddy was overjoyed. He loved wrassling, he loved bears and he loved putting my Mommy in embarrassing situations.

"Kids, your Mommy is going into training this week to wrassle a bear," Daddy announced as he passed us a newspaper with an ad featuring a picture of Jimbo. "She is going to squeeze the bear grease out of old Jimbo."

Mommy didn't want to wrestle a bear, but she also didn't want to disappoint Daddy and the temptation of \$100 in groceries sealed the deal.

"One, Two, Three," my sister Lisa and I would count as Mommy threw out her arms and legs attempting to do jumping jacks.

She trained hard by practicing headlocks on my brothers and a flying elbow she had seen "Macho Man" Randy Savage perform at an outlaw wrestling show in Grundy.

As the big day grew closer, Mommy's courage started to fade. Even with all her hard work, she didn't want to do this alone. She called upon her best friend, Crazy Sadie.

Sadie was the wife of my Daddy's friend and drinking buddy, Oscar. She and Mommy had become friends by default.

"I'm really not sure I can do this," Mommy confessed to Sadie. "I need your help."

Thus, the tag team was formed.

On Saturday morning, just after the Smurfs went off, we loaded into the van for the 10-minute drive to Tiller's Supermarket.

Mommy and Sadie were the only two to sign up to wrestle Jimbo.

"In this corner, from Kennel Branch, Beautiful Barbara and Crazy Sadie, the Killer Cooks," the announcer read from a note that we later learned Daddy had given him.

The match started with Mommy running toward Jimbo and trying to catch him by surprise. Turns out the surprise was on Mommy. Jimbo flipped her over and pressed his nose into her bottom for a not-so-friendly hello. The audience roared with laughter as Mommy crawled to tag in Sadie. Sadie wasted no time going on the attack and took even less time to be flung on top of Mommy by Jimbo's huge paw.

The referee stepped in to stop the match just as Sadie got a bear nose in the bottom.

While they didn't win the \$100 in groceries, as a thank you for a record day in sales, Mr. Tiller did present them with a container of honey shaped like a bear. A sweet treat that Daddy and us kids enjoyed, but Mommy refused to touch.

TERESA L. MATNEY AND BRIAN F. SHORTRIDGE

BUCHANAN COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

**Buchanan County
Public Schools
ESL Classes**

Amy Presley, ESL Teacher

Most people don't think of central Appalachia as a multicultural, multilingual, or multiethnic place. But the makeup of these mountains is changing. The last two years I have had the joy of teaching English learner students in Buchanan County. We have welcomed students from Mexico, Honduras, Ukraine, India, Yemen, and Japan into our public schools. These students and their families have added so much to our school culture and to our community. I am very proud of each of my ELL students, and also proud of our home-grown students for being so welcoming to the stranger (Matthew 25:35). It can make us all better.

AMY PRESLEY, ESL TEACHER

My Favorite Holiday

During Ramadan our family from all the cities of Yemen comes and gathers at my grandfather's house so that during Ramadan we can be together. We stay up for a long time at night so we play different games such as card games, carrom (I think you don't know it), dominoes and chess. We play these games for a long time.

After Ramadan comes Eid. Everyone wears new clothes because Eid is only 10 days. During Eid the children light fireworks and the adults give the children money as a gift on the day of Eid. After Eid ends everyone goes home and we wait for Ramadan to gather.

TAMEEM AL SAIDI, GRADE 10

TWIN VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL

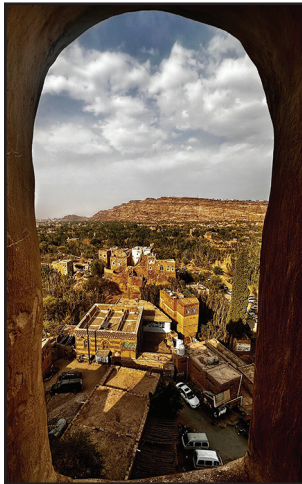


photo taken by Tameem al Saidi in the town of Sana'a, the capital of Yemen



Great Mosque of Sana'a in the capital of Yemen; photo taken by Tameem al Saidi



photo taken by Tameem al Saidi in the town of Sana'a, the capital of Yemen

My Culture

Hello, my name is Yanshi. I am from India. I follow Hinduism religion and I am vegan. In my culture, we celebrate festivals like Diwali, Holi, Uttarayan, etc. but my favourite festival is Navratri. We wear colourful dresses and dance till late night for nine days. Indian women wear saris everyday and for special events.

Hinduism is also known as Sanatan Dharma. My culture has taught me some important life lessons like love, compassion, brotherhood, and nonviolence.

People from all states make their traditional food, like idli, paratha, rasgulla, dal bati, and many more are examples. Most of the Indian foods are rich in spices. Street foods of India are very much liked by people, like pani puri, vada pav, dabeli, and dosa are some examples of Indian street food.

YANSHI PATEL, GRADE 8

RIVERVIEW ELEMENTARY/MIDDLE SCHOOL

My Favorite Food

I came to the US in 2022 with my mom and six siblings. One food that my mom and sister make that is good is called borscht. It is a red soup. It tastes salty and so good. It is served hot. Borscht has beets, onion, carrots, potatoes, chicken broth, and we put real pieces of chicken in it. We cook it on the stove for 30 minutes. It makes me feel so good and reminds me of Ukraine. We have it during special holidays.

VIERONIKA SILISHCHENKO, GRADE 9

GRUNDY HIGH SCHOOL

Dryden Elementary School

Recipes

One thing that can always bring a family together is a good meal. This year we have decided to share some of our favorite recipes with you. The students enjoyed being able to include their family in this project and even making a dish with them. Many of us have one dish that we always associate with one person who makes it in a specific way that makes us love it so much. Whether it be something they make often or just on special occasions it is always a great treat. My favorite recipe/dish comes from one of my older sisters, Jessie Lee (Lee-Lee). Apple Dumplings, mmmm sooo good.

Lee-Lee's Apple Dumplings

Pre-heat oven to 350 degrees	2 c. flour
Spray 9X13 inch pan with cooking spray	½ c milk
Dough Ingredients:	¼ c. butter
6 apples peeled and cored	

Combine flour, butter, and milk to make dough. Divide into six equal portions. On a floured surface roll out each portion. Place an apple in the center of each portion and wrap it completely.

Place each apple in the pan.

Sauce Ingredients:	2 c. water
⅔ c. butter	½ tsp. ground cinnamon
2 c. brown sugar	½ tsp. nutmeg

Place ingredients in a small pot and cook on medium heat until it begins to boil. Pour mixture over apples.

Directions: Place pan in preheated oven and bake for 30-35 minutes or until golden brown. To make it extra special, serve dumpling with vanilla ice cream.

TAMMY WADE, GRADE 4 TEACHER

Aunt Laura's Easy Southern Cornbread

My favorite food, from my favorite person.

2tbsp. Cooking oil - for use in the skillet	¼ c. water
1 c. self-rising flour	½ c. buttermilk
1 c. self-rising corn meal	

Directions: Pre-heat oven to 350 degrees. Place oil in a cast iron skillet and place in oven while it is pre-heating. Mix all ingredients (flour, meal, water, buttermilk) in a large mixing bowl and mix it until it is the consistency of pancake batter. When the oven has preheated and the oil in the skillet is hot, pour the batter into the skillet. Bake for 55 minutes until golden brown. Flip it onto a plate, cut and enjoy.

AREANNA LIVESAY-EDGAR, GRADE 2

My Dad's Fudge Brownies

My dad, Chris Gibson, makes the best brownies. It took him some time to get the recipe just right.

1 box of Pillsbury chocolate fudge brownie mix	½ c. milk
1 box of Ghiradelli chocolate supreme brownie mix	2 tsp. vanilla extract
3 eggs	Chocolate chips
1 c. melted butter	Pinch of salt

Directions: Pre-heat oven to 325 degrees. Grease and 9x13 pan. Combine both boxes of brownie mixes, eggs, butter, milk, vanilla extract, and salt. Add the batter to the pan and sprinkle with chocolate chips. Bake for 40-45 minutes until an inserted toothpick comes out clean. Remove from oven and cool before cutting into square pieces. Served best with some cold milk.

NIAH GIBSON, GRADE 2

Grandma Melissa's Chicken Casserole

My nanny likes to make her casserole, and we love to eat and enjoy it together.

1 box of Ritz crackers	3 pkgs. shredded cheese
1 pkg of boneless chicken breast (4 to 6 pieces)	1 c. melted butter
1 can of cream of chicken soup	1 head of fresh broccoli
1 box of chicken broth	Casserole dish or aluminum pan

Directions: Pre-heat oven to 350 degrees. Cut chicken into pieces, put in a skillet with about 1 c. chicken broth, cook until it is no longer pink. Put washed and cut broccoli, cream of chicken soup mixed with 1 c. chicken broth in a skillet and simmer. Crumble crackers into a large bowl, pour melted butter over the crackers and mix until it starts to form together. Layer your casserole dish/pan with half the cracker and butter mixture in the bottom. Add chicken and cream of chicken soup on top, then layer 1 pkg. shredded cheese, broccoli, then continue layering until used all. Put the rest of the crackers on top and bake until golden brown and bubbling. Bake for 1 hour.

RAYLIN GIBSON, GRADE 2

Nana's Russian Tea

Russian Tea is my family's Christmas tradition. My Nana, Judy Marion always makes this delicious drink every Christmas. The original recipe came from Glussie Pope 53 years ago.

3 c. white sugar	1 tsp. cinnamon
2 c. Tang	½ tsp. cloves
1 c. instant tea with lemon	

Directions: In a large bowl, combine all ingredients together. Use 2-3 teaspoons per 8 oz. cup of hot water. Adjust to taste.

PRESTON MARION, GRADE 2

Grandma Lynda's Cornbread

We eat grandma's cornbread for dinner a lot. I also get to help her make it.

2 c. corn meal	3 eggs
1 c. flour	2 c. buttermilk

Directions: Mix all the ingredients together in a bowl. Pre-heat oven to 350 degrees. Spray pan, add mixture, and bake until golden brown.

LEONA MARSEE, GRADE 2

Mamaw Hornsby's Easy Pizza

My mamaw usually makes this on the weekends for a snack. It is all of our favorites.

1 lb. sausage	½ c. of pizza sauce (your choice)
1 medium cup of cheese	1 pizza dough (your choice)
15 slices of pepperoni	

Directions: Heat oven to 400 degrees. Cook crumbled sausage in a skillet and drain grease. Spread out dough in a pan, add sauce, cheese, sausage, and pepperoni on dough. Once the oven has preheated, place pan in the oven to bake for twenty minutes.

JEDIDIAH NEWBERRY, GRADE 2

Mamaw Michelle's Peanut Butter Fudge

Mamaw makes me peanut butter fudge all the time. Everytime I go to her house she makes it. It is so good, and I love her.

2 lb. bag of powder sugar	16 oz creamy peanut butter
1 c. of milk	7 oz. marshmallow cream
1 tsp. vanilla extract	

Directions: Use a heavy pot. Pour powdered sugar, milk, and vanilla extract together and mix it up. Place on stove on medium heat and bring it to a rolling boil for 2 ½ minutes. Add in the peanut butter and marshmallow cream. Mix all together very well and quickly pour mixture into a buttered 9x13 pan. Let it cool and harden. Enjoy!

WESTON STAMEY, GRADE 2

Great Granny Eunice's Chocolate Pie

This has been a recipe that has been handed down to our family. My mom tells me all about how Granny cooked and provided for her family, even in hard times. We eat it for holidays and church dinners.

4 tbs. flour	2 eggs
¾ c. of sugar	1 tsp. vanilla extract
6 tbs. cocoa	¼ tsp. salt
2 c. milk	1 baked pie shell

Directions: Combine flour, sugar, milk, cocoa, and salt in a pot and add well beaten eggs. Bring to a boil and cook on medium heat until mixture thickens. Remove heat and add vanilla extract. Pour into the baked pie shell.

BENTON STIDHAM, GRADE 2

Mamaw's Macaroni Salad

My great grandma Dovie (In loving memory) made this for mom and her family almost every Sunday dinner and holidays. All the family and guests loved it. Now our family has it occasionally on Sundays and some holiday dinners. On Thanksgiving, I helped my mom make it, but I did not eat any.

1 box of macaroni noodles

½ -1c. mayonnaise (as much as you desire)

1tbsp. mustard

1 carrot (washed and diced)

2 large pickles (diced)

½ onion diced

(You may also add celery, olives, etc)

Directions: Cook and drain macaroni according to package. Add to a mixing bowl. Stir in mayonnaise to cover/wet the macaroni. Stir in mustard until the mixture has a light yellow color. Add your diced vegetables and mix it all up together. (You may test the dish when you add each ingredient to make sure the mayonnaise/mustard ratio is what you desire). Enjoy!

LUKAS WOODWARD, GRADE 2

Flatwoods Elementary School

My Service Cat

If I had to leave home and take only one item, I would take my cat. I have had him since I was 4 years old. He is my service cat. He is white with black spots. He helps me in lots of ways. If I start to panic, I hold him close to me and I calm down. He comes close to me if he feels I am getting nervous. He will sometimes get in my lap. I love him.

ARIANNA ALLEN, GRADE 4

The Beach

My favorite place is the beach. I get to ride my boogie board on the big waves. I like to lay down on my beach towel and relax. I like to catch fish in my net in the beach water. A lifeguard helped me catch a jellyfish one time. It is fun to go to the beach.

LUCAS BACH, GRADE 4

Home

My favorite place is home. I like home because it is warm there. My family is there with me to play with. Dad, Mom and my brother sometimes play Uno. I also play on my Tablet. I like to play War Robots. I like being home so I can protect my brother. At home, I feel protected and safe.

ZANE BUSH, GRADE 4

Snowy Days

On snowy days, I get to play with my friends. We go sledding outside in the snow. We like to go down the hill and drift. When we drift, it throws snow all over my friends, I get to play all day with my friends. We play tag as we sled. I love to be with my friends and family.

NOAH BUSIC, GRADE 4

Just Jump

If I could go anywhere in the world, I would go to Just Jump. Just Jump is a trampoline park. I like to do flips in the foam pit and jump on the trampolines. I can play tag and dodgeball with my sister. We have a lot of fun there. If I get hungry, there is a deli too, so I can stay longer. Playing at Just Jump makes me feel good and takes my mind off of other things.

REED CARROLL, GRADE 4

The Perfect Place

If I could go anywhere in the world, I would go to church. I want to be closer with God. I feel like I can tell him stuff that I am afraid to tell other people. I want to hear about his word, and whenever I go to church, I feel safe. I feel like he is always beside me when I need him the most. It feels like I am home when I am at church. I want to be with him because he is my heavenly Father. In my opinion, church is the best place you can go.

TYSON CARROLL, GRADE 4

My Best Friend

One of my favorite people is Roxanne White. She is always nice to me and I am nice to her. We are best friends. We like to do make up. She likes to come to my house and we do challenges with makeup. We put

names of animals in a bowl and we draw out an animal name and see if we can do makeup to look like that animal. Roxanne's outfits are pretty. I think if she likes them, I do too. I like her glasses. They have black on them and I like to color black. I like Roxanne coming to my house and having fun with me.

GRACE CHEEK, GRADE 4

Family Tradition

One of my family traditions is opening presents on Christmas morning. I like to open presents because it is really fun. It's thrilling because you never know what is inside the package. One of my favorite gifts was an art kit. I love art, so it was a great gift for me. I think Christmas is a good holiday to celebrate with your family.

KAITLYNN CLARK, GRADE 4

I Love Tennessee

If I could go anywhere in the world, I would go to Tennessee. I want to go because it's so pretty. It looks so pretty in the mountains. I want to go back and hike again. I love it so much because it's so pretty and it's so fun.

CLAIRE COLEMAN, GRADE 4

A Fun Place

If I could go anywhere in the world, I would go to Hawaii. I really like traveling. I love going to beaches where I can be in the sun and other places too. I like to swim a lot. I would like to swim underwater and find shells. I want to go to Hawaii.

AVA COLLINS, GRADE 4

Family Tradition

A tradition my family has is Taco Tuesday. We have tacos every Tuesday. I like hard shell tacos with meat and cheese. It is my favorite type of taco. My aunt makes really good tacos. After my family and I have tacos, we watch movies together. Taco Tuesdays are lots of fun.

ASHTON EDGAR, GRADE 4

The Forest

My favorite place is the forest. It is near my mom's house and I can walk to get there. It is quiet and peaceful. I sometimes swing on the tree limbs. I relax on the branches. Then I can go back home to rest. I really like the forest.

COLBURN FAULKNER, GRADE 4

I Love My Mom Very Much

One of my favorite people is my mom. She is one of my favorite people because she protects me from harm and danger. She supports my art. She gives me whatever I want. She loves me with all her heart. She makes me feel like I matter and like I belong here. She makes me feel warmth inside.

GAUGE GLASS, GRADE 4

Snow Day Fun

On snowy days, I like to play with my three brothers, two sisters, and my friends outside. We make snow angels by laying down in the snow and moving our arms and legs. We have snowball fights and play tag. My brother is fast and hard to tag. It's hard to run in the snow, but he is still fast. Snowy days are so much fun.

BRAYLON HUGHES, GRADE 4

I Love Japan

If I could go anywhere in the world, I would go to Japan. I really like their culture, such as the way they dress and their language. In Japan, there are a lot of interesting places like their shops. Plus they have interesting people. Most people in Japan have good manners, which I respect. I would love exploring and seeing what I look like in different styles of clothing, while learning and trying new things. I think Japan would be amazing.

ALESSANDRA HILLESHEIM, GRADE 4

I Like Mexico

If I could go anywhere in the world, I would go to Mexico. I would like to go to Mexico so I can learn some Spanish. I would go to Mexico so I can talk to my dad in Spanish. I would go to Mexico so I can eat some Mexican pizzas because they are good. I like the language in Mexico. Mexico would be a great place to visit.

RYLEIGH HOLMES, GRADE 4

My Friend Chloe

Chloe is my favorite person because she is really funny and nice. She is never mean. When I need something, she helps me. I invite her to every birthday party I have. She can keep secrets. I love her as a best friend. That's why she is my favorite person.

ALYSSA JOHNSON, GRADE 4

My Backyard is My Favorite Place

My favorite place is my backyard because I can play fetch with my dog. I play football with my brothers. We dig and find stuff. I swing on the swing set. I play fight with my brothers. My backyard is where I got surprised with my first dog. It's the best place ever.

JERRY KETRON, GRADE 4

An Important Item

If I left home and took only one item, I would take my iPad. My iPad is entertaining. You can play games on it. My favorite game on my iPad is Roblox. You can also call someone or buy stuff from SHEIN. If I needed help, I could call someone. I love my iPad.

ARIANNA MANN, GRADE 4

Hanging Out with My Cousins

One of my favorite family traditions is seeing my cousins every summer. My cousins and I play together and throw water balloons. We all play 'Kick the Bucket' when it gets dark. I don't see them that often but still I'm always glad they come. They drive 7 hours here and back. They're nice, sweet, kind, and smart.

ANNA MANNON, GRADE 4

Snowy Days

On snowy days, I like to make snowballs. I like throwing snowballs at my sister and my brother. When we go inside, we get hot cocoa. I like to build snowmen with my sister and my brother. I like to make snow angels. I really like snowy days because they are fun.

MARIO MARTINEZ, GRADE 4

Disney World

My favorite place is Disney World. I have been there two times. I was amazed by the huge castle. I rode many rides with my dad. I loved eating all the yummy food they had. I enjoyed spending time with my family. I went with my brother, Mom, Dad and Grandma and Grandpa. I can't wait to go to my favorite place again.

COLTON MULLINS, GRADE 4

My Favorite Place

My favorite place is my yard. My yard is big, so I can ride my dirtbike. My family and I play baseball in the backyard. We also play football, which is challenging and hard, but that makes it fun. My yard is a great place to play. I love it.

CHANCE NAPIER, GRADE 4

My Favorite Blanket

If I had to leave home and take only one item, I would take my pink blanket. I can't go anywhere without it. My blanket relaxes me when I get upset. I can put it on me to keep me safe and warm. I also like to suck my thumb when I have my blanket. (My dentist fusses at me for it). It helps keep me calm. It is my favorite thing to do.

PAISLEY NELSON, GRADE 4

Best Place

If I could go anywhere in the world, I would go to a water park. Water parks offer fun and sometimes scary slides. They have tasty food such as pizza. The best part of the water park is the wave pool. I can jump into the waves. I love water parks.

PANKH PATEL, GRADE 4

My Mom

One of my favorite people is my mom. My mom isn't selfish. She shares things with my sister and me. My mom loves me. She calms me down by talking to me when I am mad. My mom is the best mom in the world.

KORBYN PAUL, GRADE 4

A Cool Place

My favorite place is Mr. B's Gaming Lounge. It is in Pennington Gap, Virginia which is not too far away. There are so many consoles, PC's, and games. You can bring Pokemon Cards to trade. There is a game I like to play where you race and you actually use a steering wheel. It is my favorite game to play. It doesn't cost a lot of money to get in and play, so I can go there often. Mr. B's Gaming Lounge is a fun place.

CARSON PEARCE, GRADE 4

Cruise Ships

My favorite place to be is on a cruise ship. There are tons of fun things to do. I love getting to swim in the pool and sit in the hot tub. I really like the arcade. However, my most favorite part is the cady shop. This is why a cruise ship is the best place ever.

PRESTON REASOR, GRADE 4

Switch 2

If I had to leave home and take only one item, I would take my Switch 2. I love my Switch 2, and it would be the best to take. I have lots of games on it, and I love playing all the games. It has a big screen which makes it easy to play. The game I love the most is Fortnite. It is easy to carry around and I could take it anywhere. Taking my Switch 2 would be the best choice.

CASH SHULER, GRADE 4

The Best Place Ever

If I could go anywhere in the world, I would go to Japan. I would like to see the colorful views and the sunsets. I could make new friends in Japan. I could learn to speak Japanese so I could talk to the people who don't know English. I would love to go to Japan.

KADEN SIMMS, GRADE 4

My Trip to the Lake

My favorite place is the lake. I can swim and sometimes I jump off the boat into the lake. I fish and one time I caught a gar and it was very large. My dad and I ride the jetski and we do donuts. One time while at the lake I saw a momma beaver and it had a baby beaver with it. I love going to the lake.

BRYSON SLAGLE, GRADE 4

Visiting Japan

If I could go anywhere in the world, I would go to Japan. In Japan, there is a Sanrio Cafe that sells character shaped pastries. I would like to go there. There are many cherry blossom trees there and I love them. I am learning the Japanese language. I want to learn how to write in Japanese. If I ever go there, I can communicate and make friends. I would love to go to Japan.

RINI SMITH, GRADE 4

The Forest

My favorite place is the forest. I like to play when I am in the forest. There is a creek nearby where I can go to swim and play. I sometimes use my imagination and play with sticks and other things I find. It is calm because no one is there. It is relaxing because there is nobody there to annoy me. It is very pretty because of the trees. I love the forest.

DEXTER SPRINKLE, GRADE 4

The Best Mom

One of my favorite people is my mom. She takes good care of me. She runs me everywhere, like to all my practices and games. I play basketball, baseball and football, so she spends a lot of time doing that. She also takes me to fun places, like Just Jump and Dollywood. She loves me. She is the best mom.

KNOX STAFFORD, GRADE 4

I Like Hawaii

If I could go anywhere in the world, I would go to Hawaii. I would go to the beach. I could go into the ocean. I could tan and play in the sand. I could eat a lot of food, like fresh pineapple. I love warmth and the food.

ELLIE STANLEY, GRADE 4

The Snow Day

On snowy days, I like to play in the snow. I make snow angels. I like to throw snowballs at my brother. I can build a snowman. When I get cold, I go inside to get warm. I get hot cocoa and then I go back outside.

ZADIE TABOR, GRADE 4

The Creek

My favorite place is the creek at my mamaw's house. I usually go there with my brother and my two cousins. I like to look for animals such as frogs and crawdads. On hot days, I enjoy swimming there. We climb the mountain near the creek too. I can't wait for summer so we can go again.

BILLY TAYLOR, GRADE 4

Winter Fun

On snowy days, I like to do everything that I can. My friends sometimes come over and we play inside and outside. Playing in the snow is lots of fun. We play lots of games. We play GaGa Ball and Whiffle Ball outside and Wall Ball inside. We are really competitive. I love playing games with my friends.

ISAAC TAYLOR, GRADE 4

The World

If I could go anywhere in the world, I would go to New York. I want to try New York pizza because it looks so good on TV. I want to see The Statue of Liberty and see how big it actually is. I want to learn about the history of New York while I am there. I think it would be cool to see.

REED TAYLOR, GRADE 4

The Best Person

My favorite person is Knox Stafford. He helps me at school with Math. He plays outside with me at school. We also have fun playing at his house. We play on his PlayStation. I have known Knox for a while and he is the best friend I have ever had.

MALIKAH VICARA, GRADE 4

Snowy Days

On snowy days, I like to make snowmen, sled down the steepest hill, duel my Dad to snowball battles, and jump in a pile of snow. When me and my Dad snowball fight, I get the biggest snowball. My dad usually wins the snowball fight. He throws snowballs like heavy machinery.

HUDSON WARE, GRADE 4

Dollywood

Dollywood is my favorite place because it is a place where I get to have fun. I love eating at Red's. Their food is so good. My family always gets burgers and fries. They are my favorite. We get to ride roller coasters. My favorite roller coasters are Mystery Mine and The Wild Eagle. They go super fast.

I love looking at the decorations. They decorate for Christmas, Halloween and fall. I love spending time with my family there. They make the time there fun. We always have a blast. I am so thankful for them.

Last year, my class went to Dollywood on a field trip. I was so excited that day because I got to go there with my best friends. I am so blessed that I got to go with them. We had so much fun riding the rides and most importantly, spending time together at a fun place.

CHLOE BLEDSOE WELLS, GRADE 4

Christmas at Mamaw's

A favorite family tradition is going to my Mamaw's for Christmas. I get to see my Papa, which is my grandfather. Every year, we get matching pajamas. We go skating every time I'm there. It's nice going there. There are so many things to do while I'm there!

ROXANNE WHITE, GRADE 4

Morgan Woliver, Grade 5 Teacher

All About My Mom

My special person is my mom. Her name is Rachel Adams. He was born in June 1991. She went to Flatwoods Elementary. She has four children. She also has 9 pets. She is a stay at home mom. She doesn't like to travel. My mom is funny. She makes a lot of funny jokes. She is special to me because she gave birth to me.

One time before school, we switched our bus stop because we sold our house to move to Virginia. So when we got there, we waited 50 minutes. My mom said, "Why ain't the bus here?" So we left to go to another bus stop at my friend's house, and the bus came. But then we found out there isn't even a bus stop at our house.

BRODY ADAMS, GRADE 5

My Special Person

My special person is Randall Shane Aldridge, my dad. He was born in Waycross, Georgia, on September 14, 1980. He went to Lee High School and a lot of other schools because he moved so much. At his job, he is a manager. He has 6 kids and 4 pets. His favorite ice cream is butter pecan, and his favorite movie is Tombstone.

The most important event in his life was when he moved to Virginia. It's important because he wanted his kids to be there.

My dad is very brave. My dad's dad was cutting a tree down, and it fell on him. My dad saved him by lifting the tree. This is all about my special person.

TIMBER ALDRIDGE, GRADE 5

In Remembrance of My Great-Grandfather

My special person is my great-grandfather, Harry Crider. He was 88 years old when he passed away. He was born on April 13, 1937, in Jonesville, Virginia. His job was in county maintenance. He had a loving wife and five children. He also had a dog named Molly.

We have a bunch in common. We like the same baseball and basketball teams. He loved his church family. I love him so much. That is why I chose him to be my special person.

LYNDON BAILEY, GRADE 5

My Dad

My special person is my dad, Jacob. He is tall with blonde hair. He used to take me to the park. He is special because he's one of the most important people in the family.

KAYDEN BATES, GRADE 5

My Father

My special person is my dad, James W. Baumgardner. He was born in Middlesboro, Kentucky, on June 27, 1976. His job is a fabricator, and he works at JR Hoe and Sons in Middlesboro. He has seven kids and has brown eyes and hair that is thinning. He is special to me because he served in the Army and cares for me.

AMIRA BAUMGARDNER, GRADE 5

All About My Special Person

My special person is my mom, Kennedy Madon. She is 31 years old. She was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, on December 26, 1994. She has brown hair and green eyes. She went to Lee High School. She is a mom of 2 kids. She is an insurance agent. Her favorite movie is Sweet Home Alabama, and her favorite fruit is watermelon. My mom is special because she is sometimes nice. She can handle my attitude. She is the best mom.

We went to Fort Walton Beach, Florida. We had the best time there. We played in the water for the first two days, and then the last three days, the water was rough. It knocked us down.

She is the best mom ever.

LEONNA BELCHER, GRADE 5

All About My Grandma

My special person is my grandma, Lisa Willis. She was born on August 17, 1963. She has one pet and three children. Her job is Supervisor of Human Resources. She has pearl hair and brown eyes. She won the Spelling Bee in elementary school and also won a trip to Washington, D.C.

One of my favorite memories is that almost every Monday, we go and eat dinner at her house and talk. She is my special person because she is funny, nice, and kind, and takes us to fun places.

SHELBY BELLAMY, GRADE 5

The Fanciest Nancy

My great-grandma, Nancy Booth, was a very special person because she was nice. She lived on a farm in Boone's Creek, TN, with her six sisters and five brothers. Her mom was Mountie McClain Shipley. In 1942, she got married to her husband, Morris Elmer Booth. She was a licensed practical nurse at the Johnson City Eye Hospital.

She would make you food at any time, and her food was really, really good. My dad, Teddy's, favorite was her chicken and dumplings, and he makes them for me and my sisters all the time. Unfortunately, in 2000, she died after having a stroke. She was 84.

She loved to wear fancy clothes, and that's why they called her Fancy Nancy. Nancy was very special to the people around her and everyone she met. That's all about the fanciest Nancy.

EMILENE BOOTH, GRADE 5

My Great Mamaw Vernie

My special person is my mamaw, Vernie Webb. She was born on March 16, 1936. She survived the Great Depression and was an undercover detective. She also survived World War II and lost her brother in the war. She was a stay at home mom. She had 9 kids, 2 girls and 7 boys, and had a farm.

My mamaw is very special to me because if she could survive through all of that, then I think I can, too.

ARABELLA CARRINGTON, GRADE 5

Meet My Nana

My special person is my nana, Gretta Carroll. She is 59 and has brown hair and blue eyes. She is a reading teacher at Flatwoods Elementary. She also went to school at Flatwoods. The farthest place she has been is Florida, but she wants to go to Hawaii. She loves to eat strawberries. She also likes to watch her grandchildren play sports.

Her favorite color is red. Her favorite book is Charlotte's Web. Her favorite food is lasagna. Her favorite animal is a horse.

My favorite memory is when we built a snowman. My nana helped us build the snowman. Her grandpa taught her how to make big snowmen. We named him Earl, and he had a cowboy hat. That's why I love my special person.

BAILEY CARROLL, GRADE 5

My Special Person

My papaw is my special person. His name is Berley Greer. He is 84. He has gray hair and blue eyes. He went to school at Flatwoods. He has 3 children. His favorite color is blue. His favorite book is the Bible, and his favorite place is church.

My papaw is my special person because he has always been there for me when I needed him. He is loving, caring, and kind to everybody. I love him and appreciate him so much.

CALI COLLINS, GRADE 5

The Story of My Wild Crazy Mom

My special person is my mom, Heather Collins. My mom is wild, crazy, and fun! Everyone loves her, and she probably has a thousand friends.

Her parents were in the Army, and that is where they met. Because they were in the military, she had to move from state to state. Some people might say she was like a tourist! One day, she moved to Kansas and stayed there because of a military base. She lived there for most of her life until she moved to Tennessee and met my dad. One year later, she had my older brother. Two years after that, she had me. Four years later, she had my younger brother.

She is my special person because she understands me and is always there for me.

MADDILYN COLLINS, GRADE 5

My Special Person is My Mom

My special person is my Mom, Jessica. She was born in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, on May 1, 1985. Mom is 40 years old. My mom makes food and washes my clothes.

These are some of my mom's favorite things. Her favorite color is pink. Her favorite book is Duma Key. Her favorite movie is Tombstone. Her favorite food is pizza rolls, and her favorite dessert is peanut butter pie. Her favorite place is the ocean. Her favorite animal is a bear. Her favorite sports are basketball and baseball.

She is funny. One time in the summer, my family went to the lake. Me, mom, Jordan, and Ken laughed a lot. A special memory is when we went swimming, and she taught me how to dive.

MADELINE COLLINS, GRADE 5

All About My Mom

My special person is my mom, Courtney. She is 32 years old. She was born on February 13, 1993, in Big Stone Gap, Virginia. She has blonde hair and blue and green eyes. She went to school at Elk Knob Elementary,

Jonesville Middle, and Lee High School. She has 3 kids: Eli, Emilee, and Addison. One is a teenager. She loves to play Rook. My mom is my special person.

A special memory with my mom is one time, me and my mom went to get our nails done together. Then we went to Target, TJ Maxx, Walmart, and Wing Stop.

Another reason my mom is so special is that she gave birth to me. Also, she helped me play basketball and softball. She helps me when I'm struggling. She makes me happy. Also, when I'm sick, she gives me medicine. I just want to say I love my mom so much. That is the reason I chose her as my special person.

EMILEE COX, GRADE 5

All About My Mom

My special person is my mom, Kristi. My mom is special because she is very kind and she raised me. My mom is 32. She works as a CNA. She has dark brown hair, and she has hazel eyes. My mom's birthday is November 28, 1993. Her favorite place is the bed. The furthest place my mom has gone is Florida. She was in Flatwoods Elementary when 9/11 hit. I did not know that.

We have a whole farm. We have 3 dogs, like 20 cats, a whole lot of sheep, and a whole cow field with a lot of cows. There are two more cows at my house.

My mom is my special person because she is kind. She has four kids. I help her with the baby, but she is worth it. I love her.

GRACE EDGAR, GRADE 5

All About My Special Person

My special person is my mom, Miranda. She was born on November 14th. She is 33 years old. She has black hair and blue eyes. Her job is being a stay at home mom. Her favorite movie is Shrek. Her favorite game is Uno. Her favorite sport is football. My mom is my special person because she puts up with my attitude. She can sometimes be nice to me. The best memory I have with her is when we went to the beach, and we stayed there for a whole week. That is why my mom is special to me.

KARLEE GARRETT, GRADE 5

My Goochma

My special person is my Goochma, Elebora Garson. She is 71 years old and was born on September nineteenth, nineteen fifty four, in Wichita, Kansas. She has brown hair (with gray) and blue eyes. She has two children, my mom and my aunt! She has had lots of pets. Her favorite was a turtle, and currently, she has two cats and a dog. She moved around a lot as a kid! One of her favorite places was in Virginia, where she graduated!

My Goochma is a very creative person and does all kinds of crafts! She also used to own a store where she would sell them! However, she is now retired. Some of my favorite memories with my Goochma are doing crafts together. One of my favorites is helping her decorate her old pickup truck for Christmas!

I love my Goochma and wouldn't trade her for the world. Which is why I chose her to be my special person.

CHARLIE GARSON, GRADE 5

All About My Coach

My special person is my coach, Marty Hendricks. He was born in Belgium on March 17, 1986. His job is stay at home dad and basketball coach. He moved his family from Belgium to America.

My special person is special because he was my counselor at church camp. He is one of the best basketball coaches I have ever had. Marty was a really good basketball player in Belgium. His son is one of my best friends. That is why he is my special person.

FINN HAMMONDS, GRADE 5

All About My Amazing Aunt

My special person is my aunt, Teri Dean. She was born in Knoxville, TN, on January 19th. She is 39 years old, and she is a pharmacist. She had visited 25 countries and 41 states. She will be visiting Norway this summer, and that will make it to 26 countries.

I chose my aunt because she is kind and patient with me. I feel like I can always tell her everything. My special memory with her is when we went to visit her in Nashville. She took me shopping and sightseeing all throughout the city. This is why she is my special person.

ANNABEL HIXSON, GRADE 5

All About My Special Person

My special person is my dad, Reggie Hounshell. He was born in Pennington Gap on January 26, 1988. His job is Correction System Supervisor at the federal prison.

My dad is special because he coached me in my first year of softball. He's also special because he helps me with sports and is patient with me.

My favorite memory is when we went to the beach, and we were surfing. That's why I chose him as my special person.

ADALYN HOUNSHELL, GRADE 5

All About My Special Mom

My special person is my mom, Ariel Allen. She was born in North Carolina. She is a Spark driver. She travels around the world. She watches my baby cousin. She is special to me because we go to others' birthday parties and we always have a girls' day. Her favorite place is St. Augustine, Florida. I chose my mom because she is kind, funny, very, very, very smart, and she helps me a lot.

KANSAS JOHNSON, GRADE 5

All About My Mom

My special person is my mom, Tiffany Kelley. She was born on November 5th. Her favorite fruit is cherries, and her favorite ice cream is vanilla. We also like to watch the movie "Twisters" together. My mom owns a dance studio and is an instructor.

An important moment in my mom's life was when she had her kids. A special memory I have with my mom is when she took me to Dollywood. We stayed in a cabin with all of our family. It was so much fun!

This is why I chose my mom as my special person.

MIRANDA KELLEY, GRADE 5

All About My Granny

My special person is my granny, Christine Hall. She loved farming and cooking. We used to make cornbread and green beans. She's special to me because she taught me how to be a farmer and how to cook. She made me try new foods. One food I loved was pork chops. She loved to garden as well. She taught me how to garden as well.

She was alive when the Great Depression happened. I have heard that a lot of stuff happened during the Great Depression. I am so glad that she survived it. I am very glad to be her granddaughter.

AUBREE KIMBERLIN, GRADE 5

My Hard Working Dad

My special person is my dad, Danny Lee Mongold Jr. He is 35 years old and has blonde hair and blue eyes. My dad was born on January 14, 1991, in Pennsylvania. He travels for Estes Brothers Inc., and the farthest place he has traveled is Houston, Texas.

Danny Lee Mongold Jr. is special to me because he works hard to keep his children safe. My great-grandfather, Guy Phillips, was in the military, and so was my uncle, which is something my family is very proud of. My dad was also a wrestler for 12 years and won many medals. In addition, he has been a truck driver for 15 years since earning his CDL.

This is why my dad is special to me!

KYLIE MONGOLD, GRADE 5

All About My Special Mamaw

My special person is my Mamaw, Vickie Robberts. She is 64 years old and was born in 1961 on July 1. She has brown hair and blue eyes. I would love to have her eyes. She also went to Flatwoods when she was a kid. She is retired from her job and lives by herself in Jonesville, Virginia. An important event in her life was when she applied to nursing school. The farthest she has ever traveled is to Mississippi, and she wants to travel to Hawaii.

The reason why my Mamaw is so special to me is that she is nice, brave, and a bunch of other stuff. My favorite memory with him is one Christmas I helped her cook. That's why she is my special person.

MADISON MOORE, GRADE 5

All About My Special Person

My special person is my mom, Katrina Grigsby. She was born on April 8. She is a cook at Flatwoods Elementary. My mom went to school at Lee High, St. Charles, and Pennington Middle. She has 3 kids.

My mom is special to me because, first of all, she is my mom. She is the best mom to me. She is nice to me even when she gets aggravated at me, but I still love her a lot. My mom does so much for me. She tries so hard for me. I love her so much.

The special memory with my mom is when we went to Pigeon Forge to the cabin. It was so fun. When we went to the pool. My mom does not really like the pool, but it was warm because it was an indoor pool. It was also fun when we got in the hot tub at night. While we were there, my mom and stepdad made a donut with ice cream and a cookie in it. It was really good.

I love you so much, Mom.

EMMA MORANGELLO, GRADE 5

All About My Foster Dad

My special person is my foster dad, Robert. He is 55 years old and loves to watch sports. He even won a race one time! Which I think is so cool! He also likes cars, and he has a really nice Mustang. He has driven me to some places. The reason I picked him as my special person is that he has taken me into his home and has been so nice to me. I am very thankful for him.

AURORA MORANTES, GRADE 5

All About My Papaw

My special person is my papaw, Randy. He is 64 years old and is a retired coal miner. He also likes to farm. His hair is gray, and his eyes are blue. The furthest place that he has been is the Bahamas. He also has a lot of animals.

We like to go hunting, fishing, and to feed the cows. We also cook food together, like steak, bacon, eggs, and hamburgers. My papaw likes to play golf, basketball, cornhole, and football with me.

He is special to me because he is nice to me and likes to play.

JACOB MULLINS, GRADE 5

All About My Mom

My special person is my mom, Stacy Munsey. Her job is being an attorney. She was born in Knoxville on September 24, 1978. She likes to watch us play football. My mom is special to me because she is nice, patient, and takes care of me and my brother.

I enjoy going on vacation with my family. We actually went to Canada this past year. We go shopping, watch the falls, and eat food.

This is why my mom is special to me.

GRANT MUNSEY, GRADE 5

All About My Popie

My special person is my Popie, Rony Arms. He is funny, kind, and loving. A fun fact about him is that he likes to garden. He has three different gardens! He also likes to feed the deer at his house. My favorite memory of him is when he put me on a plank and swung me around. He is special to me because he has a big imagination.

AVA NAPIER, GRADE 5

My Dad is My Favorite Person

My special person is my dad, William Howard. He is very funny and nice. He is 31 years old and works for Glass Machinery. He has no hair, blue eyes, and likes to eat chocolate ice cream. He was born on March 30, 1999. He has three kids in total. My dad is brave and nice. He always gives me advice, and he loves me so much.

We went fishing, and I caught a fish, but I didn't want to touch it. I ended up holding it for 3 minutes. My dad grabbed the fish and started chasing me with it, and I got so scared! He finally stopped, but it was funny. That is one of my favorite stories with my dad.

DAWSON RANDELL, GRADE 5

All About My Special Person

My special person is my mom, Tiffany Ringgold. She works at my school and is a manager in the cafeteria. My mom is very nice and is always there for me.

My family went roller skating one time, and that is my favorite memory. I chose my mom as my special person because we love each other so much.

REMI RINGGOLD, GRADE 5

My Superhero Pawpaw

My special person is my Pawpaw, Jimmy Kimberlin. He likes to ride motorcycles and play checkers. His favorite colors are black and blue. He has blue eyes and brown hair. He is very tall. He works for Order Tech.

He went to Lee High. He was born in Wise County on July 6, 1979. I never knew he was born in Wise County or traveled to Ohio. The reason he is special to me is that he is brave and kind. He is my role model, and that's why I love him.

BRAYLYNN ROACH, GRADE 5

All About My Amazing Dad

My special person is Greg Seals. He is 39 years old and was born in Harlan, Kentucky, on January 25, 1987. His job is driving trucks. He has 4 kids, Kaydence Seals, Jayden Seals, Zackary Seals, and Zoey Seals.

My dad is so patient with softball and every sport I do. One of my favorite memories is when we won a softball championship. He is so loving and caring. That's why he's my special person.

ZOEY SEALS, GRADE 5

All About My Special Person

My special person is my grandma, Ruth Greer. She was 76 years old when she passed away. She was born on March 9, 1946, in Blackwater, Virginia. My grandma had three kids, and they all went to Flatwoods.

She was a homemaker and took care of her family. My grandma lived a long life, but she became very sick and passed away. She is special to me because she always helped people around her during their hardest times and their happiest times.

STELLA SPRINKLE, GRADE 5

All About My Mom

My special person is my mom, Sarah Wynn. She is 45 years old. Her birthday is May 28, 1980. She works as a lawyer in Jonesville, Virginia. Her favorite color is yellow, and her favorite animal is an elephant. Her favorite movies are Bridget Jones's Diary and Gone with the Wind. Her favorite book is A Time to Kill. That is why she is so special and unique, and why I love her so much!

WYNNE STALLARD, GRADE 5

My Poppa

My special person is my Poppa, Carl. He is special because he is nice and brave. When I used to live in Mississippi, he let me ride his go cart. It was so fun! He has white hair and a white mustache. He is a retired veteran and is 80 years old. He was actually in the Vietnam War. He sadly has PTSD from the war.

My Poppa likes to buy me stuff. He is very special to me because he does a lot for me. I love to go to his house and spend time with him, that's why I chose him as my special person.

LUKE STANLEY, GRADE 5

Thankful for My Mom

My special person is my mom, Morgan Thompson. She is a nurse. Her favorite color is blue. She is 32 years old. She was born on October 25, 1993. She got married on May 24, 2014. Also, she has 4 kids: Kinsley, Rhett, Max, and June. That is all about my mom. I love her because he is loving and she takes care of us.

One of the funniest times was when we were at the lake, and she pushed me off the boat and into the lake! Then, she pulled the ladder up into the boat, and I was stuck down there. She is important to me because she is funny and she takes care of me.

KINSLEY THOMPSON, GRADE 5

All About My Granny

My special person is my granny, Katy. She is 73 years old and has brown and gray hair. Throughout her life, she worked in a bakery. She loves to bake cupcakes and cakes.

I think it is awesome that she got saved at the same age that I did. My granny beat cancer not very long ago, and I am very proud of her. I picked my granny because she is always nice and kind to me.

RAYLIN THOMPSON, GRADE 5

When My Dad Took Us To The Waterpark

My special person is my step-dad, Steven. He works in construction, gets the fallen trees off the street, and he even pushes the snow off the streets! He also likes to go hunting. Steven is kind, brave, strong, and cares about all of us. My favorite memory with him is going to the waterpark. He took us 3 times! It was so much fun! That's why I chose him as my special person.

GREYSON WILLIAMS, GRADE 5

The Governor's School of Southside Virginia

*Tracey Nash,
Creative Writing Teacher*

Those Old Wrestling Shoes

I remember the first mat that I kissed,
Rubber and sweat mixed like rain and dust.
Your feet like thunder,
And I, the echo that followed.
Each match, I carried your weight and will.
The crowd's roar was like a heartbeat in my soles.
I've bled alongside you, not from skin, but from stitches,
Each tear a new win, with scuffs and scars.
You left me in the closet,
While new shoes took my place in the light.
But tell me, do they know your full story?
Do they remember the taste of victory AND defeat?
I am the ghost of your grind,
The silence feels like sweat to me.
I was the walk before your run.
And you, my reason to sprint.

CONNER CHAMPION, GRADE 12

Lifted

Some days I spill out of myself,
pieces everywhere,
and I pretend it's fine
even when it isn't.
But faith has this quiet way
of lifting the corners of my heart,
like hands holding a balloon
just long enough for me to breathe again.
Trusting God never promised a smooth road,
only a steady presence,
a place to lean
when the world feels too heavy to carry.
And on the mornings I unravel
faster than I can pray,
He gathers what's left of me,
whispers stand,
and somehow, I do.

TAYLOR DAVIDSON, GRADE 12

Barbie

★Third Place, Nancy Bolmeier Fisher Scholarship Recipient★

When I was younger, I thought bleach could fix things. I don't mean the kind you use to clean your bathroom, the smell of clean, like everything is fixed, although maybe that too. I'm talking about bleach for your hair. That harsh, burning stuff that smells like regret and stings like insecurity. See, there were these girls. You know the type: effortlessly confident, hair like golden sunshine that shines in the light, all the right clothes, who all laugh at moments I didn't quite understand yet. I wasn't trying to be them, not really. I just wanted to grasp that confidence. I never wanted to orbit someone else's universe. I thought, maybe if my hair looked like theirs, I'd feel like I belonged. If my hair stayed pinned straight, gleamed in the sun, and made me buzz around the school. So, I did it. I bought a box of drugstore bleach and locked myself in the bathroom like I was doing something brave.

Soon, my nose turned up as I smelled the 2 parts mixing in the bowl like a science experiment, a purple mixture that would change my life forever. YouTube videos, specifically non-scholarly, shouted in the background as I carefully painted my scalp like a landscape painting. Half an hour later, my head was on fire and I smelled like a chemical plant. As I stared in the mirror, the reflection looking back, I saw an adolescent mind with a Walmart bag tied to her head. I did not recognize myself. But when that 30-minute timer buzzed and beeped, I saw the orange, patchy, but blonde

hair I had longed for in my dreams. Honestly, I hated it, but I didn't say that. I walked into school the next day pretending to be confident, my head held high while my mind was running a million miles an hour, palms sweaty, pretending this was the real me. For a second, I felt it. That little hum of approval, "Oh, your hair!"; that middle school high of being noticed. When you feel like you are on top of the world. After the first few awkward conversations of approval, it wore off, because when you change yourself to fit in, you're just wearing a costume. This wasn't me. I could feel it, in my hair, in my skin, in the awkwardness of pretending to be someone I wasn't.

The thing is, my natural hair? It's wild. It doesn't always cooperate, but it's who I am. It curls in waves that shoot out in all directions, it frizzes up when it's humid, and it has this personality that I didn't realize I was trying to bleach out of existence. Slapping on alkaline agents that burn through confidence like a match to wood not only damaged my hair, but my self-image. I thought I needed to change to be beautiful. I then realized all I really needed was to stop apologizing for being myself.

So yeah, that day I bleached my hair? It was about learning the hard way that authenticity is louder than any trend, stronger than any insecurity. Now, I wear my hair the way it grows out of my head. I love it. I honor it. Even on the messy days, especially on the messy days, because it is mine. Imagination will make your hair smell strong, weaken your smile, and question what you know. Most importantly, I've realized the people worth keeping around don't need you to bleach away anything.

DANIKA DOYLE, GRADE 12

**However, this is not required, it must be said.
I'm sorry for not being there. September 6th 2021**

Excerpt

I never thought a day like this would come,
When silence stretched too long, and shadows crept into my home,
The quiet was heavy, unnerving—no laughter, no footsteps,
Just an emptiness that gnawed at my soul.

I came home from a long day of school, weary
I expected the voice, the smile, the presence of my sister.
But the house was silent, the air thick with unease.
Dad worked a graveyard shift; Mom wasn't yet back.
Usually, you were here, waiting, Soon
My heart clenches
My heart shatters
Pain rips through my chest,
I cry,
overwhelmed by helplessness.

BRAYLON FULLER, GRADE 12

Momma

I never want these days to end
I never want to leave the house for good
I never want to say those last goodbyes
I never want to hear you say, "Goodnight I love you!" One last time
I never want to hear that teal front door shut, just for it to never be open again
I never want to stay gone forever, Like a YoYo I'm drawn back
I never want us to be separate from each other, every mile adds a tear
I never want to stop our contact with each other, when we text it is like my Kryptonite
I never want to see you cry because of something I did, It causes me pain every time
I never want to cause anymore stress than you already have juggling life's necessities
I never want to be a problem to you like many of the ones you already have to deal with I
 never want to bug you when you are in need of something important
I never want to not be there when you need me the most
I never want you to think I don't care, I always do, I always do
I never want to disappoint you, I try my best at everything I do no matter how it turns out I
 never want to do anything for anybody other than you
I never want you to think I'm not enough, because I am, I can prove it!
I never want you to pass me off, look over me like some old CD
I never want to lose you,
Never

SLATE GEORGE, GRADE 12

Octopuses Have Three Hearts

Octopuses have three hearts:
two of their hearts pump
blood through the gills. one
circulates blood to the
rest of the body.
one of my hearts has died.
and i feel a little piece
of my soul die every time.
the pain of you cuts off circulation,

little by little, until
it becomes a coping mechanism,
even a blessing,
not to feel.
i am content with my two hearts.
they are enough to
keep me alive.
keep my gills breathing.
i prefer not to feel my body.
it is easier to live
with dull pain than with
sharp pain, even
if it means a part of me is
gone forever.

KATE GRIFFIN, GRADE 12

A Gene of Silence

My middle namesake never spoke much,
at least not as I knew him.
With every summer spent together,
I held more sleepless nights than words with him.
When I sat in a church in mourning, I shed tears,
for a man I barely knew.

My first namesake does much of the same.
But I feel the want, the pull, for connection
But the bridge is never crossed.
I fret the same day will come,
where I will mourn
for a man I barely knew.

My last namesake seems to be different.
I know the man I hope my children will know,
but I fear that gray hairs will tie his lips sealed,
And my children will only know him
by the smell of smoke and fiberglass,
and not by the sound of his voice.
Where they too will stand mourning
a man they barely knew.

SAMUEL HARRIS, GRADE 12

Seven Ways of Seeing Us

I.
At first, a sunrise never to fade.
Every text, a streak of light slicing through the dark.

The world felt warmer when your name lit on my screen.

II.

You spoke in emojis and late-night laughs,
each call a river carrying time away.
Hours felt like minutes.

III.

Then came the storm's whisper.
Never said busy, but silence said it louder than thunder.
I stood in the rain, pretending it was peace.

IV.

Your words became leaves in autumn,
rare, fading, drifting away before I could catch them.
I watched them fall, still hoping for spring.

V.

Something unspoken hums between us,
the air feels different when you're near.
A song that forgot its own rhythm.

VI.

I wanted to ask, what happened to us?
But questions are fragile glass, once dropped, they shatter-
so I swallowed and smiled like I didn't care.

VII.

Now I see it clearer-
A duck in summer, gone by autumn.
Maybe love isn't gone, just resting somewhere quieter.

TROY HAWKINS, GRADE 12

Rebuild Season

The first time I took off the heat shield of my exhaust manifold, I didn't expect it to feel like progress. I expected it to feel like failure. It was rusted in place, the metal was sharp enough to cut me, and every time I tried to turn the wrench it sounded like the car was laughing at me, an old creaking of a voice like, You thought it'd be easy? I had a vision for the job: Take something old, take something neglected, make it fast again. Make it loud again. Make it mine. The first thing I needed to get out of my mentality for transformation was that it's not a before-and-after collage. The kid in me wanted transformation to the way sporting highlight reels presented it, four seconds of chaos, a cut, and suddenly you're a hero, jumping the avalanche of gravel, suspension compressed, turbo screaming and pavement reinvented as your racetrack. When I watched motorsport, I didn't just envision speed, I saw a promise, potential: you can take pressure and turn it into motion. Therefore, if only I can add enough parts to myself, greater discipline, higher grades, a stronger mentality, a new goal, I would create the final version of myself. The version who doesn't hesitate. The version who always knows where he's going. But transformation doesn't come with directions like a torque spec. Transformation comes when you realize you can't pretend it's fine for too long. In the world of cars, that's the first opening of the first hatch



Creative Writing Class students share TOP submissions

you wanted solid metal behind. In the world of humanity, that's the moment you realize your determination is waning inside yourself and you can't blame anyone else.

For me, it wasn't an all-nighter with smoke on the line. It wasn't an explosive disaster. It was quiet enough in many senses that I should've heard it whisper behind my back all along. I had convinced myself to be "the car kid," "the kid who likes hard things," "the kid who can get through." I reveled in my acclaim of knowing how things worked, what I could explain, what I could fix and improve upon. This identity served its purpose for an extended amount of time; however, over time, I've realized that it was serving as armor from transformation. If I could keep my eyes on machines, on physical improvement, maybe I could avoid the more nuanced forms that don't show immediate progress; those that involve revamping your life instead of bolting on extra parts without recycling anything into scrap. For far too long I believed that what didn't serve me were smaller minute actions (procrastination, distractions, poor focus) that functioned like grime on the surface (filters that needed cleaning), but I have since realized what needed to be discarded in a far larger situation was the high of infatuation with transformation without pain. I wanted transformation without confronting the fact I have outdated, rusty parts. I wanted to be someone new without mourning who I was before. But that's not how it works. Therefore, when a car comes into my garage for transformation, the first step is diagnosis. I don't get to skip ahead to paint and decals without addressing what's going on underneath first. A project car humbles you; there's no arguing you're "good enough" if it doesn't see fit. A project car makes sure you're paying attention. A project car ensures you're listening.

As I got more serious about cars (and cars became serious about working for me), they started breaking down in the same fashion that I did; I'd get excited by the initial promise of newness, shiny routines, lofty goals, grandiose focuses, and then I'd pooped out when the work became tedious after three months. When a routine no longer had novelty, I'd blame something wrong with me and angrily berate myself for being "inconsistent", as if inconsistency is a character trait instead of a teachable skill. Eventually, I realized I wasn't failing because I wasn't passionate; I was failing because I was addicted to the high of starting from scratch. Starting is clean. Starting is cinematic. Finishing is different. Finishing is sanding, or worse, tightening every clamp once just to second-guess yourself and restart; it's checking every hose twice; it's doing what you already did again because you did it wrong in the first place and just assumed you'd know better the second time around without completing step one through fifty-nine first. Finishing is admitting you don't know as much as you think you do.

That's where my transformation began, through avoidance and ignoring the glamorous parts of my own life but finished through maturity, not in big steps but in small refusals to fail through small tidbits of my own

maintenance. I started treating every day like it was a build process, not so much performance, not so much putting it out there for others to see, but daily maintenance. Maintenance is so boring it won't win you any applause. Maintenance keeps you alive though, and that's how I've transformed myself. I developed routines instead and started getting comfortable showing up, even when it didn't feel good, but especially when it didn't feel good. I focused on being the kind of person who does that little thing even when that little thing feels stupid, and that's a transformation no one celebrates but happens anyway. To me, transformation used to mean becoming someone else who was more ambitious and less driven by personal emotion than they were by what's easiest to fix.

What's changed now too is I let go of my ideal version as an alternate ego. There's always fear swirling around us, even if we don't feel fearless sometimes, while fear lingers over our subconscious, we don't even know what's happening! Sometimes behind effort, sometimes behind sarcasm to a level where we brush things off like "I don't care." My biggest fear? To be basic, to look like someone who had interests but no success; someone who could talk big game about aspirations but never fulfilled them; someone who peaked at their potential but never came through. I've met that person too many times in my own head and tried running from him with speed, skill and effort, but I've learned you can't outrun yourself, you gotta rebuild. Rebuilding involved me letting go of a certain premise from inflated perception when no one was looking, that my self-worth depended on being exceptional, that with all this effort exerted to prove effort, for the sake of intelligence, what's I've over-torqued and deemed necessary, suggests I've known this all along implying I would disappear if I stopped running. When transforming myself turned that bolt that was corroded into something over-torqued through the years, it squealed in protest in opposition, it felt like I was breaking something instead, but then it turned, and once it turned, it felt like everything went clear. As if the whole action had life again from breathing and cross-ventilation! I still want to care about excellence; I still want to know what success feels like; I still want to create masterpieces!

For me now, it's not racing toward an imaginary finish line; it's accountability of choice because I want what I'm keeping, curiosity toward why something runs instead of learning how to memorize the correct answer without critical questioning. I want difficulty but not self-inflicted pain where grit pressures me down into submission

A project car isn't ever really done, something always rattles, something always needs attention, but this used to stress me out because there's got to be perfection, but now it's comforting. The last time I took off that heat shield I'll always remember; the second time must've been a charm, I didn't pop everything off in one clean swoop; I struggled, I took breaks, I circled back, I brought another tool; okay, I learned patience but then, I eventually got off the shield, not because I'm strong or shredded, but because I stuck with it.

And that's how I've transformed myself, not from honesty into becoming someone else overnight, but coming back and trying again, even when it's unpleasant, even when it's jarring, even when it brings home realities that exist only beneath, but especially then, because being beneath is where all transformation occurs anyway.

JACKSON ICENHOUR, GRADE12

Hooked On Victory

I didn't think my hands could shake that much while holding a fishing rod. I had been in little local tournaments before, but this one felt different. The morning air was cool, the lake was still, and the chatter of other competitors around me felt louder than usual. Everyone seemed more experienced, more confident, like they already knew where the bass were hiding. Me? I was just hoping not to embarrass myself.

We launched the boat with my heart thudding like a drum. The water shimmered in the early sun, and for a moment, I tried to remind myself that fishing had always been about peace for me. It was about patience, about being out there surrounded by nature. But the second the first boat sped off to start the tournament,

peace went out the window. Suddenly, every cast mattered. Every minute felt like I was either going to prove myself, or go home empty-handed.

The first hour was rough. Cast after cast, nothing. I could see other boats pulling in fish, and with each splash in the distance my stomach knotted tighter. Doubt crept in, telling me I wasn't good enough, that maybe fishing was just a hobby, not something I could ever take seriously.

But then, just when I was about to change spots, I felt it, that tug on the line. Not just a nibble, but a strong pull. My heart leapt. I set the hook and fought, the rod bending almost in half as the bass thrashed under the surface. For a few tense moments, it was just me and the fish, the whole world holding its breath. When I finally pulled it into the boat, I couldn't stop grinning. It wasn't the biggest fish in the world, but it was solid, and it meant I was on the board.

One catch turned into another. By midday, I had a decent bag of fish, and something shifted inside me. The nerves faded. I wasn't just out there fishing, I was competing. I was part of it. I belonged.

When weigh-in came, I stood in line with my bag of bass, trying to act calm while my legs felt like jelly. One by one, the weights were called. Some were higher than mine, some lower. Then it was my turn. I placed my fish on the scale and held my breath. The number blinked up, and I heard the announcer call it out, high enough to push me into the lead.

The rest of that moment is a blur. People clapped, someone patted me on the back, and all I could do was smile so hard my face hurt. I had won. My first real bass fishing tournament, and I had actually won.

But what I remember most wasn't the trophy or the bragging rights. It was the way it felt to realize this wasn't just a pastime for me. Winning showed me that fishing was something I needed to do, something that made me feel alive in a way nothing else did. It wasn't about luck. It was about preparation, patience, and trusting myself when the pressure was on.

That day on the lake changed me. It turned fishing from a hobby into a passion. It made me believe in my own ability to push through doubt, to stay focused, and to fight for something I love. And every time I pick up a rod now, I think back to that first win, the day I stopped being just a kid with a fishing pole, and started to see the angler I could become.

GAGE JONES, GRADE 12

The Forever Friend

Depression makes me rot in bed for days
Depression makes me lose my appetite
Depression makes me starve for life
Depression makes me want to crawl out of my skin
Depression makes the sounds of birds chirping sound like nails on a chalkboard
Depression make me anger at all the missed opportunities
Depression makes me project that anger to whoever dares to close
Depression make me forget birthdays
Depression makes darkness less scary and more comforting
Depression makes me want to dig a hole so deep in the earth I touch the center
Depression makes school seem like torture
Depression makes conversation feel like a chore
Depression makes my hearts race when eyes land on me
Depression makes the days to long and the nights to short
Depression makes me wish I was never born
Depression makes me want to disappoint everyone so they give up

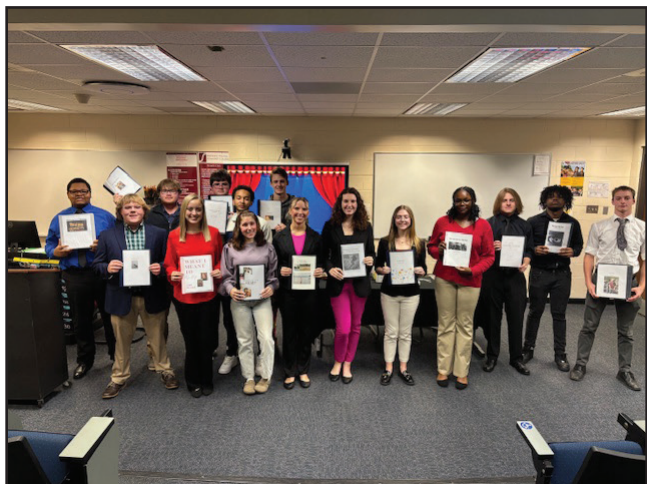
Depression makes my big dreams feel like fairy tales
Depression makes love seem superficial
Depression makes laughter ear splitting
Depression makes me crave blue light and hate the sun
Depression makes me a shell of who I am
Depression makes a mockery of my potential
Depression makes disappoint my biggest expectation and fear
Depression makes my loudest prayers feel like whispers against a storm
Depression makes comparison consume my brain
Depression makes cameras feel like fun house mirrors
Depression makes me wonder where I went wrong
Depression makes me wonder if others can see what I can
Depression makes my memories of the pain vivid
Depression makes time of peace seem galaxies away
Depression is always there lurking in the shadows
Depression is always waiting for me when I fall
Depression is my closest friend and worst enemy

JALEAH PULLIAM, GRADE 12

Motherly Love

In the photo, my mom and I are smiling by each other's side on a chilly, sunny day outside. The sunlight was shining in our faces just enough that our smiles were that little bit more pronounced. My mom is with her arm around me, hugging me as she has all of our lives, and I could still feel just how warm she was that day. We had just stepped out of my grandma's house, where the wind kept tugging at my jacket—the black one with the red lining—while my mom wore her soft gray sweater that she always grabs when the weather drops. Before we took the picture, she said, “Come here, Trey. Let me get my baby in the sunlight,” pulling me close as if her arm could block the cold. It is typed in the bottom of the photo, “#Because I have a Black Son.” That photo gives me pause to remember just how much love and care that my mom has for me on a daily basis.

When I zoom in on the photo, I get to see the small things that mean the world—the way the light shines on her glasses, the warmth in her eyes, and the way the bold colors on my jacket pop into the background. Her



Creative Writing Class TOP students

hand is gently on my shoulder, and even as a mere touch, it is protection. Right before the picture snapped, she brushed a bit of lint off my shoulder and said, “Hold still, baby.” I laughed and told her, “Ma, you are always doing too much,” and she just smiled because that was our routine. You can almost feel the cool breeze from the dusting of gravel behind me, but the warmth between me and the person that I am standing with takes center stage over all else. That smile on my face is not just for the camera; it’s because standing next to my mom gives the spring in the step and pride and love in the heart. Zooming out, I get the larger picture—a mother and son standing, not merely posing, but projecting a bond that goes deeper. It’s more than a joyful scene; it’s a declaration. The words in the photo tell me that the love that my mom has is one that comes with courage and strength. She is anxious about me, teaches me to stand proud, and reminds me that I am worth something. The world may look at me differently because I am a young Black man, but my mom never lets that define who I am. She is my biggest defense and loudest supporter.

This photo is special to me because it captures the love, pride, and hope that is our relationship. My mom’s smile conceals the fear that at times she is holding towards me in a world that judges me before they get to know my heart. And my smile, at that time, betrays the extent that I have faith in her to protect me. I can still hear her voice from that moment reminding me, “Keep your head up. Don’t let anybody dim your shine,” and every time I look at the picture, those words feel stitched into the background. Every time I look at it, I am reminded of the things that she has taught me—that I should be proud of myself, that I should always be positive, and that I should never let fear make me lose the joy that I have.

I shall never forget the experience of the day—the light, the laughter, and the love that was around us. The wind kept pushing at my jacket, and she squeezed my shoulder to steady me just as the camera clicked. In this photograph is the story of the selfless love of a parent and the love-filled gratitude of a son.

TREYVION SPRUILL, GRADE 12

the shaking place

My hands won’t stop buzzing, like they’ve got secrets they won’t tell.

I try to breathe slow, but the air feels thick, like it’s judging me.

Everyone’s talking, laughing, living,

and I’m here sinking into a silence only I can hear.

My heart knocks on my ribs like it wants out.

I hate how loud it is. I hate how loud I feel.

The room is bright but everything inside me flickers.

I keep pretending it’s fine, like that fixes anything.

My thoughts run laps around my skull until they’re dizzy.

I wish they’d trip. Just once.

I swear my chest is a locked door with no key.

I swear everyone else got a map except me.

I bite my lip until I taste metal,

something real, something that doesn’t swirl.

They say it’s “just anxiety,”

but it feels like a ghost chewing through my spine.

It feels like the whole world is leaning too close.

I keep blinking, hoping the fear will unstick from my ribs.

But it clings like wet clothes, heavy and cold.

And I’m here again, pretending I’m not drowning in a room full of air.

ADDISON THARPE, GRADE 12

Ghazal of the Woodstove

I wake each morning to the cold darkness of winter
And stumble down the stairs to the waiting woodstove

It is cold, the embers of last night's fire covered by ash
But still there, ready and willing to reignite the woodstove

Firewood waits, hauled the night before, by me and unwilling brothers
And now sits stacked neatly beside the woodstove

I lay the smaller pieces on the embers, and encourage them
With small, slow, silent breaths, to spread, and with flames fill the woodstove

The wood is dry, it has spent its whole life waiting for now,
It's final gift of light and warmth, performed in the alter that is the woodstove

The fire has started, it won't go out. Larger pieces now
Now go in, until they are stacked to fill the woodstove

Now I take a break, the young fire needs no more aid,
Just space to spread his wings and time to heat the woodstove

It doesn't take long, and now I stand with my brothers, who were so unwilling to help
Yet now happily stand basking in the warmth of the woodstove.

ELLIOT WAITE, GRADE 12

I Will Not Drown

I board the rocky ship - creaking with every movement from the waves
Fear fills my veins, what if the ship decides to sink under the pressure and I drown

The clock ticks counting down every second the timer decreases This SAT can determine my
future, my life, what if I fail and drown

I sit at lunch pondering the ending to Ophelia - such an unexpected death
What will be the end of my story? What will be my legacy? What if I never reach it, I drown

The church bells ring, beginning of a new day
We get the news from a call, A father, husband, beloved church member drowned

The list never ends, assignments compile on one another, They will consume my life as I
drown

I lay in bed at night, looking at the ceiling not daring to see 12:00 am on the clock

The thoughts don't end, they spiral into epitome, I envy those who sleep, I breathe as I
drown

I inhale as I step into the crashing waters. They hit my face without remorse
I don't turn my head, I keep taking each step forward, today I will not drown

I spend countless hours reviewing biology, I step on the court, I finish the assignment,
I will not let myself fail, I will succeed, I will not drown.

GRACE WALSH, GRADE 12

Grace Metz Middle School

The First Time I Moved to Manassas

When I was 7 years old, everything was calm in my country, El Salvador. It all started when my dad got a call. My dad and mom, including me, had to get in the house and lock the doors. The best option was to leave El Salvador. The trip to Manassas was 60 Hours away, and we didn't eat in that 60 Hours. We were starving during our trip. We entered the US without "papers". Then, the Border Patrol took us from his car on a trip to prison.

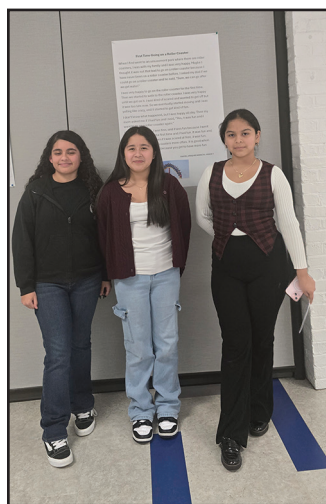
After that, we got out of the car and went to jail for a few days for illegally entering the US. At that moment when prison time was over, we continued on our trip to Manassas. But we got tired of walking, so we decided to ride the bus all the way to a restaurant for something to eat. The food was really delicious. Later, we got out to get on the bus again. After that, I saw a playground, so I was thinking about playing on that playground outside but my parents said it was too dirty to play.

When we arrived at Woodbridge, we visited our favorite neighbors and went to the mall. When we got there, we bought some toys for me and the kid's neighbor. After buying those toys we went home with the neighbors. We had a good time. In the end, we had a good night with them. I was happy for my toys because when I meet someone new and receive something I feel happy. This is my story about my first time in Manassas.

NEHEMIAS ARIAS ORELLANA, GRADE 7

My Favorite Game: Rodeo Stampede

I like rodeo stampede because it is a fun game and it has a lot of challenges. We have to complete mission to keep advancing throughout the islands to find new animals, and it is timed. If you have animals that you have not found yet, you can use them to find new animals. There are 5 different parts of the islands and every time you expand your sky zoo you unlock new animals. Every island is harder to get to and you need to upgrade your animals' habitat to keep advancing to the next island. When you get to a certain point, you unlock the sea zoo and can get time to fish in the ocean. Rodeo stampede has a lot of rare animals, there are multiple rare animals and it gets harder and harder to find rarer animals. There are 3 different sky zoos. All 3 of the sky zoos have different animals to catch and time.



Metz Middle School students
presenting their project stories
to parents

Rodeo stampede has seasonal events where you can unlock new animals during that season. You can also have baby animals if you find a match for the animal that you want to have a baby version of. There are multiple animals that you can discover in the different island you can get customs that you can use on your character. You can find endangered animals and if you find a match of the same endangered animal, the animal will no longer be endangered and will spawn all around the map. You can time dinosaurs, you can find many different types of dinosaurs that will spawn on the map. It is difficult to find rare dinosaurs. You can also decorate your zoo how you want your zoo to look like. In rodeo stampede, you can get limited animals in events and anniversary. You can earn achievements to show that you complete what you had to do to get the achievement.

The lesson that rodeo stampede teaches me is that if I want to do something I have to work for what I want. The importance of working hard shows that if you want to complete something you have to put in hard work.

The lesson I learned is that I have to do hard work to get what I want to complete the badge that I want to get is that I have to do hard work. Rodeo stampede makes you do a lot of hard work to come to what you want to get to in rodeo stampede. In rodeo stampede, the game teaches that if you work hard you will get to where you what to get to. rIt is a great game to teaches that hard work can pay. You can learned what to do in hard situations so you succeed in what you want to do. In conclusion, rodeo stampede can pay off all of the hard work that you did.

JUNIOR BALCARCEL AQUINO, GRADE 7

My First Field Trip

One day in 6th grade, I went on a field trip to a museum filled with all kinds of objects used back in World War 2. It was a cool place to visit. We went to different spots in the museum that show airplanes and other gadgets. I was on the 1st floor and I saw airplanes. Then, we saw guns that people used during the war. Then we went to a different part of the museum to see the people's outfits. Later, I went to the 2nd floor, which is the highest floor. We saw more objects from WW2, the ammo that the people used to shoot at the enemy. After that, I went to the edge, I looked down. It looked high, my hand was wet, I looked down again. Someone was trying to push me off the edge, I was scared out of my life, it impacted my fear.

We were about to leave the place, but we were missing a person. This person got lost. We all looked for the kid, but every time I looked at the edge again, I was scared, hand wet again, so I went to the bathroom.

When I got out of the bathroom, people were still looking for the kid. The kid was right behind my back. After that, we got on the bus and left the place. We got back to school and we had some free time. It was a really cool trip. I saw objects in the Museum that were really cool, cars and coins, for example.

HECTOR OMAR CALDERON DEL CID, GRADE 7

My First Time Moving and Selling

The first time I moved was when I was 5 or 6 years old. My parents decided it was time to move. I used to live in New York City. Until my parents decided that they wanted a new fresh beginning chapter. Do I know why? no, but back then, I used to live with my grandma and grandpa and everyone else in my family on my mom's side in one house.

At first, I would have been fine just moving to a different house because there wasn't that much space in the room so I was thinking that we were just going to move to a different house. I didn't think that we would move places. I didn't think that I would move to Virginia, but here we are. So it all started when my dad's side of the family gave him a call and said that they wanted to meet me, my brother, and my parents. My parents were talking about how they wanted to move. So my dad's family were convincing my dad that they should move to Virginia. After that, my dad had to talk to my mom and convince her and she was "sold".

The next thing I knew was they told my grandma and grandpa that we might move to Virginia, if we don't find a house in New York. After a lot of searching, nothing. So we had to move to Virginia. We told my grandparents and they said that we wouldn't be able to take everything. They were right, so a couple of days after that, we were still trying to make space for our supplies. After thinking, they decided to have a garage sale. We got our belongings all outside to sell them.

It was frustrating, we waited for hours and no one got anything. People just came to see and left. They were like only 2 sells and then our neighbor came and she bought a toy set or something for her niece. Then I got money. But, she was the only one who bought a toy and we needed to get rid of them. She was next door, so my cousin and I had to go over to her house and give her more toys for her family.

We both don't like to talk so we were fighting over who was going to do the talking and who was just going to stand there. At the end, we decided that we will both talk and so we were like "Hi, does the lady who

bought from our garage sell live here?"and they were like "no sorry" and then we said "are you sure" and then just waited awkwardly.

So then she called her grandma and said "did you buy something from this little girl from the garage sale next door?" She replied with, "Yes, you saw me". Then, she said, "Why? Did anything happen?" and we said "no, we just wanted to give you some more toys as a thank you for buying from us" and she said "well, thank you". We handed her the gifts. That was the most awkward thing I had ever done.

I was with my cousin, so after that, we were relieved and walked back home. We were surprised it worked because we didn't know what to say so we had to make up something. After that, a couple of weeks passed, so we had the moving day coming.

YARELI CANTORAN SALAS, GRADE 7

How I Started Playing Soccer

I started getting more interested in soccer when I saw my older cousin playing and when he started winning trophies. It looked like a fun experience. So, every time I would go to my tia's house, I would go with my cousins outside to their big backyard and play soccer, or I would go outside and play by myself or with people at the park. Once, my other tia mentioned a club where my older cousin used to play when he was little. I asked my mom about it and she said yes. After that, I started training everyday with my cousins until the season started and I got much better.

When the season started, I had practice/training every Tuesday and Thursday. The games were on Saturday. Then, when the tournament came, my cousin and I were so nervous. The first time, my team won. We put in all our effort and most of my team made goals. Like they said, teamwork makes the dream work. When the second season came, I was more comfortable with my team, I made a lot of new friends. We got along really well, and we were honest with each other. My team and I would teach each other skills that we didn't know. When games or tournaments came we would figure out our play out on the field.

Soccer has changed me in many ways. Like, easier to communicate with other people, and more confident in what I do. And now I'm more busy focusing on soccer and getting better. I challenge myself to do harder things and watch videos and not give up until I get it. Sometimes, I think of quitting but I can't because I'm doing this for my future. I always have faith in myself or I try to, but it's hard to have confidence in myself when I see other girls my age playing much better than me. But this has never stopped me from playing.

ASHLEY CENTENO AGUILAR, GRADE 7

I Faced My Fear

When I was about 6 or 7, I was at this lake with some of my other family members.

They were in the lake jumping in the water you know doing all that water fun stuff. The lake had otters. On the other hand, I was scared of going in the water because the lake's water was dark green and murky. I was afraid of what was under the fade of dark green-black, deep water, and mischievous otters.

I would mostly put my feet in the water, scared an otter would come up from under the dark lake. My stomach ached thinking of the deep water below my feet, but I wanted to try. I looked for a cookie to eat. The heat outside was unbelievable but I got a cookie. I ate it and it was great.

It was turning late. My family members were still in the dark murky water, giving me the creeps while I was hearing birds peep.

Finally, I thought about it. I saw my mom and aunt jumping and enjoying the water so I asked my mom. I was calm so I jumped in the creepy murky water. It was magical. It was green, cold and refreshing. It was possessed. I actually felt that I could wake up by the cold water drenching me in the lake. I couldn't swim so I was closer to the floating deck the lake had.

I realized it's not that bad. I felt happy and relieved because I faced my fears of the lake and deep mystery. No, I jump all the time now without my fears taking over my mind, I don't think of what's below my feet, but I know facing my fears was complete. To this day, I still think about that lake and the deepness of it. That experience will be something that will never leave my memories, because of how magical it felt, the cold water and greenish emerald color of the lake's water.

ANNELIZ ZOE FERNANDEZ ANAYA, GRADE 7

A Summer Vacation at Florida, Orlando

First, to begin with, my family and I were packing our stuff in the middle of the night and getting ready to go. We went to the car, and my sister and I fell asleep because Florida was like 10 hours away (I felt bad for my dad because he was the one driving). About 8 hours passed, and I woke up. I was like, "Are we there yet?" and my dad said, "Not yet," so I tried to go back to sleep.

Minutes passed, and I was just looking out the window. I was waiting for my sister to wake up so I could have someone to talk to. I didn't want to talk to my dad because I wanted him to stay focused and not get us into a car accident. Also, my mom was sleeping, so I wanted her to relax. I waited and waited, and they finally woke up.

Two or three hours passed, and we got there. My sister and I couldn't wait. It was very hot outside, and it felt like a desert. My family and I went to the Universal Studios theme park, and believe me, it was very hot. We entered the park, and it was so big. There were roller coasters, indoor rides, and other attractions. It was cool.

We went on the Jurassic Park boat ride and got on the boat. We were very excited for the new adventure we were about to experience. There were dinosaurs everywhere. Suddenly, the boat started to go up, and it was dark inside the place the boat was entering. There were creepy dinosaurs, and we saw a T-Rex at the end of the ride. We did not expect what happened next.

The boat dropped suddenly, and it felt like I was falling out of my seat. We screamed for about 6 or 7 seconds. We got freaked out because of the big drop, but the ride was cool. We went on that ride two or three times and then went on more different rides. My sister wasn't ready for scary rides like big roller coasters and things like that. But the rides we went on were very fun, and it was a very good place to take videos and pictures (we even got a picture with Captain America).

We stayed there the whole day, and it started raining around 7 or 8 p.m., so we left around 9:00 p.m. We went to our hotel, and I couldn't believe I had gone to the place I had been dreaming about for years. The experience was so great. I was so grateful that I have parents who really care about us.

The next day, we went to Daytona Beach, and the beach was very nice. We stayed there until night, and the days in Florida got better and better. Then we went home and looked at the pictures we took at the beach and the theme park.

That's how my trip to Florida went. The thing that was special for me was that I went to the theme park I had always dreamed of going to since I was 6. I just couldn't believe my parents took me to the place I had dreamed of visiting.

JOSE GARCIA, GRADE 7

King Domina

A time I felt scared was when we got out of a restaurant after eating. We were full. We walked and walked, looking for a ride, and then we got to one. We waited in line for 1 hour. When we got to the front of the line, people were on the ride and screaming, and I got scared.

After that, my friends and I got in the cart. We were scared, and we waited for everyone to get on. Then it started going fast, and my friends and I started screaming and yelling for help. Lots of stuff came out of our mouths. Then it started to slow down, and finally we stopped.

We got off the ride. I felt bad, and my friends did too. We walked for a little while. When we got to the bathroom, we all threw up, and we felt sick for a little while. My friend went on baby rides for a little bit. After we got on the big rides, we all felt sick for a while. That day, I learned that you can have fun, but something bad can still happen. We were there for 12 hours or more, and I still had fun.

KEVIN GARCIA GOMEZ, GRADE 7

The First Day at Metz

On my first day at Metz, I woke up early, got ready, and went to the bus stop. Then the bus picked me up, and my heart started racing because I was thinking in my head, “What if I make no friends? What if my friend does not see me and I have to sit alone by myself? What if the teachers do not like me and scream at me? What if I get lost a lot of times and am always late to class?”

During the first week, I did not need that much help, but I still got lost here and there. By the first month of school, I knew all my classes and my teachers. They were nicer than I expected. I made a lot of new friends and even said hi to my friend’s mom.

The only class that I was scared of was P.E. because I had not gone to P.E. yet, so I was a little nervous. Then I met my teacher, Ms. Wood. She was really nice and very young.

Now I feel good about this school and know all my classes. I wrote this story because it was very scary at first, and I am proud of myself for being strong and brave. The lesson I learned is don’t be scared. Be brave and keep your head up. Thank you to all my teachers and to the principal. That is the end.

JHIMI GARCIA LOPEZ, GRADE 7

Soccer Star

It all started when I was a little kid. When I went to the park, a kid named Miguel said, “Do you want to play?” I said yes. He had a ball, and I said, “What is that?” He said, “It’s a ball. Have you ever seen one?” I said no, and he started teaching me how to kick the ball. I did it, and I was excited. He said, “Let’s play tomorrow,” and I said, “Okay.”

The next day, I saw him playing outside, so I asked my dad if I could go outside. He said yes, so I went outside. He said hi, and I said hi back. We started playing, and he said, “This game is soccer.” I said okay, and we started playing soccer every day.

Five years later, I knocked on his door and asked if he wanted to play soccer. He said, “Yeah,” because we hadn’t played for a long time. While we were playing, he said, “When did you get so good?” I said I had been practicing all that time. I practiced so hard that I even got better than him.

The next day, I was playing soccer and saw two brothers named James and Justin playing. I asked them if I could play with them, and they said yes. Miguel came out to play and said, “Who are they?” I said, “My new friends.” He said okay, and we were all friends. We were playing a match: it was James and Justin vs. Miguel and me. After an hour, we won. It was close, 27–23. We were tired, so we said, “Let’s play tomorrow,” and we all agreed.

My friend asked if I should join an academy, so I joined one about five minutes from where I live. I tried out and passed. The academy was called DMV Soccer Academy. The coach said the first game would be Saturday, and that was the next day, so I went.

When I got there, I started warming up for the game. We were playing against USA Soccer Academy. The referee whistled, and the game started. I had the ball first, so I passed it to my teammate named Jonathan. He ran with the ball. I was in front of the goal, so I called for the pass. The ball was high, so I jumped as high as I could and made a header. The score was now 1–0.

USA started with the ball. The referee whistled, and they began playing well. We couldn't get the ball. Their best player made an amazing pass to the left wing. He ran so fast, but I was fast like him. He kicked the ball to the middle, and the striker headed it, but my goalkeeper saved it. I was open, so he passed it to me. Someone was blocking me, and my teammate named Snider was open and running, so I passed it to him, and he scored. It was halftime, and my coach told us to pressure more and pass more, so we all agreed. The match was going to start again in two minutes.

The match began, and they started with the ball. The referee whistled. USA had a big player on their team, and he got the ball first. My dad told me to pressure him, so that's what I did. I pressured him and took the ball away. My teammate was open and ready to score, so I passed it to him. He passed the defender and scored a great goal. The score was now 3–0.

They restarted and added a skilled player to the game. I had to pressure him, so I did. He passed me easily, but I wasn't going to let that slide. I slide-tackled him and got the ball, but the defender took it away from me. He kicked it to the middle, and the skilled player scored an amazing goal on my goalkeeper.

At full time, we won 3–1. My coach said I played well and that I should join travel soccer. Travel was a good team, and the practices were very hard, but I joined. My dad was proud of me because it was a good team. He said the next practices would be on Wednesday and Friday.

We went to practice on Wednesday. The first 10 minutes were very hard, and we were sweating a lot, so the coach gave us a water break. We continued practicing, and after 40 minutes, we were so tired we could barely move our legs. The coach said we would get used to it. He also said we would have indoor practice next week. I said okay, and I told myself, "I made it."

JULIAN GUERRERO ESPINAL, GRADE 7

How I Met My Best Friend

My mom had been friends with her friend for a while. Years later, her friend had a daughter. When she had her daughter, we didn't hang out immediately. It took us until we were both 7 years old. When we were seven, we met for the first time at a birthday party. At first, we were shy, but we started getting comfortable and ended up playing together.

She has been to all my birthdays or at least texted me on those days, and I have done the same for her. She sometimes sleeps over at my house, and I sleep over at hers.

For holidays, we give each other things like baskets, snacks, and other gifts. She comes over for birthdays, Thanksgiving dinner, and Christmas. Whenever we don't talk for months, we randomly start talking again and act like nothing happened. We can FaceTime for hours without getting bored, and if someone tells us something, we share it with each other.

Now we are both 13 years old and have been friends for almost 6 years. She is basically my sister. Looking back, I think you should always have one good and loyal best friend you can trust to tell anything, and they will keep your secrets. If I wasn't best friends with her, I probably wouldn't have as much fun with anyone else like I do with her.

PERLA GUZMAN ORDONEZ, GRADE 7

When I Went to Travel

One day, when I traveled for the first time, I was nervous. It all started when my dad and my club told me, "We are going to travel, so try your best." The first thing that happened was that we were driving there, and I was thinking, "What if we don't win? What if we don't make it to the final? What if I do something wrong while I am playing?" But I had nothing to worry about, right?

A long time ago, when none of this had happened yet, I had just joined the club. When I played a few games with them, I wasn't that nervous. But since I was traveling, I was super scared in the beginning.

Next, I played my first match, and I felt good because I didn't really do anything wrong, but that's my opinion. Later, we went to get some food, and I was thinking, "I hope I do better in the next match." When we went to our hotel, I went to sleep imagining that we won the final. Then my dad woke me up and said, "Come on, let's go." I said, "Okay," and we got in the car and went to the game.

During the time I was playing, I wasn't playing that well, but I was fine, right? After that, my dad said, "Do better next time," and I said, "Okay, I will, Dad." In the end, we made it to the final. My coach said, "Guys, this is your last match. You better try your best." We all prayed, and then we went to play. We scored first, so it was 1-0. Then they tied it 1-1 in the last second. We went to penalties, and it was 4-4. Our goalkeeper saved the penalty. Then it was my turn. I went to the middle, and I scored. Everyone was super happy. But the reason why that moment is important to me is because I overcame something I never thought I could.

LENNY LOPEZ GOMEZ, GRADE 7

How I Made My First Best Friend

One day, on the first day of 4th grade in elementary school, I was a shy, calm, loving girl with no friends and no one to talk to. Then a new student came to my class. She was pretty and kind, and her name was Emily. I really wanted to be her friend, but I was scared that she was going to hate me. Two weeks later, my teacher suddenly told us to pair up with a partner to do a project.

I looked everywhere to find someone to pair up with. Suddenly, a girl tapped my shoulder. I turned around and noticed that it was Emily. She asked me if I wanted to be partners, and I agreed. When we started working on the project, she asked what my name was, and I told her. We started becoming friends, and my shyness began to go away.

Two months later, we became best friends. We laughed and talked to each other a lot and even made jokes together. It was the best year of my life. I will never forget the moment when I made my first best friend.

EILEEN MARTINEZ GONZALEZ, GRADE 7

My First Rabbit

Warning: Death of a Pet

I got my first rabbit when I was 10 years old. I named her Ruby. I only had her for a few weeks. One day, my parents told my older brother to take Ruby outside so she could get some sunlight. My older brother hated Ruby because she would bite sometimes. He took her outside and left her there without bringing her back inside.

I was at my friend's house playing with her because she was sad that her dog had been run over by a car. I told her about my rabbit, and she asked if she could see her. I said sure. I ran to my house and opened the door. I looked in the kitchen because that was Ruby's favorite place to watch my mom cook or wait for leftover carrots.

I saw my mom and dad on the couch watching a movie. I asked them, "Where's Ruby?" because she would usually sit on the couch with them or lie down near them. They said they hadn't seen her in a while since my older brother had taken her outside.

I went to the backyard and saw her lying down in her cage. I called her, but she didn't get up or look at me. I opened her cage and picked her up, and I felt that she was stiff. I ran inside screaming and crying, looking for my older brother to ask him why he didn't bring her inside. My parents told me it was okay and that they would get me another rabbit. My older brother heard me screaming and crying, so he came inside. I started

hitting him and throwing things at him, asking why he didn't bring her inside. He started laughing in my face and said, "It's just a rabbit. It's not that deep." My parents sent him to his room.

I went back to my friend's house and told her what happened. She told me that it wasn't my fault and that everything would be okay. I learned my lesson to take care of my pets and not let my older brother be near them.

YEIMI MEJIA CACERES, GRADE 7

My First Day At Metz

The day before the first day of school, I was very excited. I woke up in the morning jumping with excitement. I changed, and I woke up my parents. "Dad, Mom, wake up! Let's go buy clothes for tomorrow!" They said, "You need to eat first." I responded, "Why?" They said, "Just take a shower." So I did.

When we were going to the store, I saw a luxurious car. It was a Lamborghini Aventador. I took a picture of it. Since it was my brother's birthday, we went to K1 Speed and celebrated his 9th birthday. When we got home, it was past bedtime, and I went to sleep happily, not realizing that we didn't buy clothes, school supplies, or a backpack.

When I woke up at 5:30 a.m., I noticed that there were no new clothes. I called my mom and asked, "Where are my clothes?" She said, "Yesterday we went to K1 Speed, and I think we forgot about buying clothes." I quickly did the laundry and washed my clothes very fast, about 30–40 minutes. I had to wear my old clothes, and I was very sad.

When I got on the bus, everything felt different, and I saw new people. It was a new school year in 7th grade. My life changed once I stepped inside. I looked at my schedule and started searching for my classes. I asked a security guard where Room 2014 was. He said it was on the second floor and gave me a school map so I could find my classes more easily.

I found my homeroom. My teacher asked for my name. I told her, "Miguel Melendez." She told me to sit at desk 4. I sat at my desk, and my new computer was there. I opened it and started filling out a new school year goal. Then the bell rang. I left and started looking for my 1G class. That was the start of my 7th grade year. This really means a lot to me because it was the first time I was a student at Metz.

MIGUEL MELENDEZ MELGAR, GRADE 7

My First Time Trying Out For Track

At the beginning, when I was 11, it all started when my friend said we should try out for track. I said, "Sure, why not?" So I got the permission slip and filled it out at the last minute.

My friend later said she was not going to try out because she broke her ankle and couldn't participate for a week. After that, I went to tryouts by myself. I saw some of my other friends there. On the first day of tryouts, it was about 94 degrees outside, and they said we had to practice outside. I remember feeling like I was going to pass out because of the heat. We ran about four or five laps. I'm not sure.

The next day I went, it was even hotter than the day before. I remember that I didn't want to do track anymore. They told us that if we didn't want to continue with the sport, we could switch. So I switched to cheer, and some of my other friends switched to cheer too. The next day was the last day of tryouts.

I had to learn all the moves, and it was finally the last day. I remember they called up our numbers. They told me that I joined too late, so they said no. I wasn't really upset, but looking back at it, I should have joined cheer earlier because I was thinking about joining cheer, but I ended up joining track. I will never forget how hot it was from that point forward.

JANNEY MENDEZ REYES, GRADE 7

The Beginning of How New Things Can Help you Learn

It all started when I was around 7 or 8 years old. I wanted to try a sport, which was soccer, but I was scared because I couldn't speak much English, and I didn't think anyone knew Spanish. I was scared until 3rd grade, when I became friends with a girl named Jocelyn, and she spoke Spanish. She told me she wanted to try a sport but wasn't sure which one.

I knew I wanted to play volleyball. When I started at Mayfield, I wanted to try out for volleyball, but I was scared to ask because I didn't know what to say. I started watching videos about volleyball. Then I learned about American football, and I started liking multiple sports at once because I thought volleyball and football were fun. Later, I began enjoying soccer again. I ended up liking three sports because I thought they were all fun. I started playing those sports when I was around 11 or 12. I began practicing so I could get better and become more skilled at playing different sports.

As time passed, I started thinking about quitting football because I thought becoming a professional would be difficult, so I gave up. After thinking about it more, I realized that I shouldn't quit my dreams. At that moment, I started training to become better at playing those sports and to learn more instead of quitting. During that time, I realized I was overthinking about quitting because I was scared of injuring myself again. I managed to get the courage to start again.

Meanwhile, others were already choosing what they wanted to do. I felt behind, still deciding what I wanted to play while they were already practicing the sport they had chosen. Eventually, I decided to focus on volleyball and soccer. I also wanted to try something different, like cheerleading, but I couldn't because I had detention. Since I couldn't try out for cheerleading, I decided to look at other sports to see which ones interested me and try them to see which ones I truly loved playing.

Looking back at my old self felt like leaving the past and focusing on my future, so that's what I did. I decided to change for the better and improve at the sports I love. I will never forget when I was afraid of trying new things, but now that I have courage, I try new things without being afraid. From that point forward, I started facing my fears and taking opportunities to improve myself. Since then, I have waited for the right time to try new things instead of rushing into them. I think it is better to take your time and learn from your experiences.

YULIETH MENDOZA MARTINEZ, GRADE 7

My First Ever Team

First, when I was born, I eventually started playing soccer. When I was four, I began playing, and I played for a long time. When I was twelve, I started playing with my first-ever team. At first, I was really nervous, but after a little time, I finally made more friends.

Then I got used to having friends. The coach liked me because he said that I was really good. Then I played my first game. I was really happy. I was playing defender, and when players tried to get past me, I blocked them. When the game finished, we lost, but I still gave it my all. The coach said he was very proud and that he knew I tried my best.

Next, we had practice the following day. We did a lot of drills and ran a lot because of how badly we played on Saturday. The coach was really mad. Then we played another tournament. We warmed up and got on the field. The referee blew the whistle. They scored on us first, but then I scored to make it 1 - 1. When the game finished, it was 9 - 3. We won by a lot and won the league, the trophy, and medals. I was so excited. I kept playing with the team until today. That's the end. I hope you enjoyed it.

JONATHAN REYES GUTIERREZ, GRADE 7

The Time I Went to Summer School

The reason you go to summer school is when you fail a test. I went to summer school because I failed my test. Summer school was like regular school, but it was shorter. When I was in summer school, I felt sad about it because I didn't like school. I didn't have fun, and I didn't have friends in the class. Another reason you might go to summer school is if you get bad grades during the year.

I went to summer school two times, and it was not fun because you can't really enjoy your summer break. Also, summer is not my favorite season because it is hot outside and not cold. Even though we can go to the pool and play soccer outside in the summer, I still didn't like going to summer school.

In summer school, I had to do a program called Lexia. I didn't like that program because I didn't like language arts. I had bad grades in it, so that's why I went to summer school. In both times that I went to summer school, I had to focus on language arts because I was struggling with it. In the end, after summer school, I improved in language arts and English, but I still need to improve a little more. I am still a little weak in it, but I will keep trying to get better.

ERICK REYES MARTINEZ, GRADE 7

My First Time Going to an Amusement Park

The first time I went to an amusement park happened when I was 9 years old. It was in 2022. I was staying at my uncle's house for the summer for about a month. I went with my grandma, uncle, aunt, my aunt's parents, my sister, and me.

The place we went to was called "Knoebels Amusement Park." The place was very fun and full of amazing and scary rides. First, we went to eat breakfast because there was food there. Then my sister and I went on a small ride. After that, we went on a big ride called the Phoenix.

Then we went on the bumper cars, which were very fun. Next, we played games inside the arcade. I remember that I won a blue sparkly duck. I also won a red rubber spiky ball. After that, my uncle and my aunt's dad went on one of the biggest rides in the park. We went on the water ride again because it was the most fun ride I had gone on.

My sister and I also went on the carousel. I sat on a blue horse, and my sister sat on a brown one. Another thing we did was go on a ride that was like a mini roller coaster. My sister and I went on it twice. Sadly, after that, we had to leave. In conclusion, this was my story about the first time I went to an amusement park.

ASHLEY RIVAS ESCOBAR, GRADE 7

First Day at a Whole New School

On September 24, 2025, It was my first day of 5th grade but I was really nervous. The thing is, I used to be at a prince william school before i moved schools. I didn't know anyone from Manassas City schools, so that was one reason why I was so anxious. When I arrived at that school, I thought it was weird how such a big school only had two grades. There was only 5th and sixth grade in that school, and apparently 5th grade was only upstairs and it depended on your last name. I was in JMU. I wondered why they separated kids because of their last names. A kind middle-aged woman showed me to my class. My teacher, Mrs. Carter smiled at me and the middle-aged woman, and welcomed us. The kind lady told my teacher that I was a new student. My teacher smiled at me, and introduced herself before introducing me to the class. The class went silent, and i got very nervous since

During class, I made some friends. Some girl waved at me, I waved back with a small smile on my face. Then two girls walked up to me, only one waved at me, I waved back. A few weeks passed and I had made a decent amount of friends. I kept making friends after that, but I didn't talk to anyone outside of my 5th grade

class, only to mutual friends. I made lots of friends and we had our own little group. My friends now were all friends, even the ones that didn't know each other. I also had other friends besides them, but I wasn't as close with them. A few months went by, or so I thought. I loved 5th grade so much I forgot completely it had its end.

On September 24, 2025, it was my first day of 5th grade, and I was really nervous. I used to go to a Prince William school before I moved. I didn't know anyone from Manassas City Schools, so that was one reason why I was so anxious. When I arrived at the school, I thought it was weird that such a big school only had two grades. There were only 5th and 6th grades in that school, and apparently, 5th grade was only upstairs, and it depended on your last name. I was in JMU. I wondered why they separated kids by their last names.

A kind middle-aged woman showed me to my class. My teacher, Mrs. Carter, smiled at me and the woman and welcomed us. The kind lady told my teacher that I was a new student. My teacher smiled at me and introduced herself before introducing me to the class. The class went silent, and I got very nervous. During class, I started making some friends. A girl waved at me, and I waved back with a small smile on my face. Then two girls walked up to me. Only one waved, and I waved back. A few weeks passed, and I had made a decent number of friends. I kept making friends after that, but I didn't talk to anyone outside of my 5th grade class, only to mutual friends.

My friends and I had our own little group. My friends were all friends with each other, even the ones who didn't know each other at first. I also had other friends, but I wasn't as close to them. A few months went by, or so I thought. I loved 5th grade so much that I completely forgot it would eventually end. The last few weeks of school arrived. A boy from our 5th grade class decided to sit with us. My friends and I were confused, but we didn't say anything until he did. He explained that the other boys in our class didn't want to sit with him during lunch or hang out with him. We let him sit with us, and we all ended up getting comfortable with each other.

After lunch, we would go to recess and hang out together. At first, he would follow behind us. Then he got comfortable and started walking with us. One day, during the last 15 minutes of recess, he went to play with his other friends. We didn't mind. We let him go play with them.

The last week of school arrived, and we kept talking to each other until the last day. The lesson I learned is to never be nervous because you will eventually find the people you feel comfortable with.

MARIANA RODRIGUEZ GONZALEZ, GRADE 7

When I Got My First Pet

The first time I got my pet was when I was 11 years old. I felt so happy when I got my first pet. I was crying at the same time because I knew I had to take care of him. My first pet gave me many memories. He had a ginger color and a small, cute face. He was very gentle, and his eyes were beautiful. It was a delightful moment in my life.

My sister was so happy because we got a cat. At the same time, I was thinking about all the responsibility that came with having a pet. We had to pay for many things. We had to take him to the doctor, buy him food, and get him toys. Even though it was a lot of responsibility, it was fun because we were getting a new member of the family.

At first, I didn't believe my mom when she said we were going to get a cat because she always said she didn't like cats. I thought she was joking. But we really did get one. Our cousin gave him to us. When we first got him, he had a brother. My cat's name is Tom. He is so cute. I wish I could show you a picture of him. When we first got him, he was little, but now he is bigger and even cuter. He is orange. I have many pets. I have cats, birds, fish, and hamsters. It feels like I have a whole zoo in my house.

BRITANY ROSALES SIERRA, GRADE 7

Facing Fears

One day, I went to Six Flags. I have always had a fear of heights, but I really wanted to go on a roller coaster. Unfortunately, I was scared. So my sister had the idea to go to Six Flags. I said, “OMG, yes! That would be really fun, and I’ll actually get on a ride.”

When we got there, I was really scared, but I told myself, “It’s going to be okay.” I was nervous about going on a roller coaster, so I told them to go without me, and maybe I would go on the next one. After that, my sisters finally convinced me to get on a roller coaster. I was really excited but scared at the same time.

It was time to get on the roller coaster. I was scared, but I thought it was time to face my fear. It was actually really fun. After that, I went on many rides with my sister and some with my dad. I thought I was going to fall off, but it was so worth it. Now I really love roller coasters. They are so fun, even though they can still be scary sometimes.

One lesson I learned is that sometimes you need to face your fears to see how fun something can be. Moreover, now I know that it is okay to be scared, and it is worth facing your fears.

KAYLEE SANTAMARIA LEON, GRADE 7

First Time Going on a Roller Coaster

When I first went to an amusement park where there were roller coasters, I was with my family, and I was very happy. I thought it might not be that bad to go on a roller coaster because I had never been on one before. I asked my dad if we could go on a roller coaster, and he said, “Sure, we can go after we get water.”

I was very happy to go on a roller coaster for the first time. Then we started walking toward it. I was very happy until we got on. I started to feel kind of scared and wanted to get off, but it was too late. We eventually started moving, and I was yelling like crazy. After a while, it started to become kind of fun. I don’t know what happened, but I was happy all day.

Later, my mom asked me if I had fun, and I said, “Yes, it was fun, and I want to go on a roller coaster again.” When it was all over, I felt fine, and I was happy that I went on a roller coaster for the first time. Even though I was scared at first, it was fun, and I overcame my fear. Now I like to go on roller coasters more often. It feels good to overcome your fears because you get to have more fun wherever you go.

CRISTEL VASQUEZ ASENCIO, GRADE 7

*Xochilt Tamara Flores Torrez,
Academic Language and Literacy 8th*

All About Myself

Hi, my name is Anthony Escobar. I was born on June 28, 2012, and I am 13 years old. I have always wanted to go to El Salvador, and I finally went once with my sister, her boyfriend, and my brother. At first, I was scared because it was my first time on a plane, but I got used to it. When we arrived, I saw big mountains and a beautiful sunset. The food in El Salvador was delicious. I tried pupusas for the first time, and I really liked them. That trip made me happy because I got to see a new place and experience something I had always wanted to do.

The sport I like the most is soccer. I play on a team called NVSC, which stands for Northern Virginia Soccer Club, and I am a goalkeeper. When I first started playing, it was difficult for me. I didn’t really know the rules, and I wasn’t very good yet. But with practice and help from my coach, I improved a lot. Now I know how to dive, shoot, dribble, and run faster. We usually play on Saturdays and sometimes on Sundays. We also have picture day and more games, and then we will have a tournament.

One of the most important things in my life has been visiting El Salvador because it was my first time there and I got to meet family I had never seen before. We explored a lot and did fun things together. We went go-karting, played soccer, and visited two water parks. We also went to the mall and watched a movie. It was the biggest mall I had ever seen. This trip helped me feel more connected to my family and made me want to travel more in the future.

ANTHONY ESCOBAR HERNANDEZ, GRADE 8

Coming to the USA from Honduras

My name is Brianna Garcia, and I'm in 8th grade. I'm from Honduras, and this is my story about coming to the United States.

Coming from Honduras was a lot of work. As soon as I arrived, I didn't like it. It was very hard for me because it was a big change. This happened seven years ago when I moved from Honduras to the United States. I didn't understand English, and people would stare at me for not knowing anything. Some people even called me names.

The reason I came to the United States was because my parents wanted me to study here. They believed it would help me have more opportunities and learn another language that would help me in the future. They also said that school in Honduras was very hard. At first, coming here was sad because it was difficult to leave my family behind, especially my grandma. Learning English was also challenging. However, now that I am in 8th grade, I see how much it has helped me. It has helped my family too.

Looking back, I realize that I am glad I came here to study and support my family's needs.

BRIANNA GARCIA FLORES, GRADE 8

My Pet Bunny

A long time ago, when I was 4, my cousin got me a bunny for my birthday. I was so happy. The bunny was white and small. I named her Elsa because I loved Elsa when I was a kid. I always carried Elsa in my arms, and I was always taking care of her. I never wanted to leave my house because I didn't want to leave Elsa alone.

Suddenly, Elsa started to get sick. My cousin took her to the vet, and they said it was nothing serious. I was relieved, but Elsa wasn't getting better. Sometimes she would throw up blood. My cousin kept taking her to the vet, but they didn't really know what was going on, so they had to keep Elsa there to find out. She stayed for maybe a week, and eventually they found out what was happening. However, my cousin never told me what was wrong because she didn't want me to worry. Still, I knew it was something very serious.

My cousin had to take care of Elsa and watch her all the time instead of me. I was really sad, and I was scared that she might die. As time passed, she got a little better. But then my older sister accidentally stepped on her little leg and broke it. They had to take Elsa to the vet again. This time, they said she might die. They also said they would have to keep Elsa for a while because her injury was very serious.

My sister felt bad for what she did. I was mad at her for a long time, and I was very sad because I thought Elsa was going to die. After that, we went back to the vet, and they said we could take Elsa home, but they gave us two choices. The first choice was to give her a shot so her leg could heal, but she would be in pain all the time. The second choice was to put her down. In the end, my cousin decided to put Elsa down because she didn't want her to suffer. I was really sad, but it was for the better. Eventually, I forgave my sister after two years.

GABRIELA GUARDADO MORALES, GRADE 8

Try out

We all at least tried out for something. I like soccer, basketball, volleyball, swimming and even acting. I'm going to tell you how I tried out for a soccer team. First, I'm going to tell you how I got into soccer. One day,

when I was 7 my dad showed me how to play soccer since all of my siblings played the sport. After a while, I started to like to play the sport so my dad decided to put me in a team. I played well and we won some trophies but I took a break for 4 years before I started playing soccer again. My friend invited me to play soccer again and to get back into it I decided to play again. I played with them for 2 months until one of my friends told me to try out for a team. I thought about it and I decided to try out. They told me to be at the field at 5pm and to bring all my gear to play.

On the day of the try outs it was packed. There were about 50 kids trying out for one team. I started to overthink thinking if I would make it but I knew I was going to make it if I do well. First, the coach made us run up and down the field to see how well we ran. I passed but some people didn't pass. The next drill was to see how well we dribbled between the cones. I passed that one too. Then, she tested how we can shoot the ball. When I stepped up to kick the ball I shot the ball and it went too low so I didn't pass the test. The last drill was how we could pass, cross and control the ball. We had to cross the ball into the box for the player to shoot the ball in goal. For the passing part we had to pass the ball left to right for the player to score. At the end of the try outs she called up each player one by one sadly I didn't make it.

What I learned from that day was that I had to work harder each day. Even if my body couldn't handle it because I knew there were better players than me. If I wanted to make any team I had to be twice as good then the other players. The reason why I still remember this is what shaped me how I play today. Now, I am on a team that I tried out for because all the training I did helped me to get even better than before. Another thing I learned from that day is how to stay more calm and more motivated because after that day I lost all my motivation and I got short tempered. This is important to me because how motivation and short tempered can really put you down in things that you love.

BRANDON GUEVARA, GRADE 8

My Best Friend

I met my best friend in 5th grade. His name is Juan David, and he was my best friend. We met in class when we looked at each other on the first day of school, and we were both mean-mugging each other. At first, we didn't like each other, but then we started to get along. We used to play basketball together during recess. Then 6th grade came. I still talked with him, but that was the year he moved all the way to Front Royal.

On the first day of school, I was expecting to see some friends from last year. I already knew William and a girl named Norma. I had a lot of friends, but not many of them were in my class. I remember when I first saw Juan David. He had brown skin and slicked-back curly hair. At first, I didn't like him, and he didn't like me either.

The first time I saw him, he didn't want to be my friend. Then we both started playing basketball at recess, and from there, we began to get along.

CARLOS HERNANDEZ, GRADE 8

Playing Soccer

Do you remember playing a sport like soccer or basketball for the first time? Well, I do. I remember playing soccer with my friend for the first time in elementary school. He taught me the basics and explained the different positions. He also showed me how to shoot the ball, and that's when I started liking soccer.

After that day, I played soccer every day with my friends and kept getting better. After a year or two, I wanted to join a league with my friends, but it was too expensive. My friends were already in a league and were always busy, so I couldn't play with them as much. Because of that, I lost interest and stopped playing for a while.

About a year later, I saw my friends playing soccer in my neighborhood. At first, I didn't want to play, but they kept asking me to join. I finally said yes, and it reminded me of how much fun soccer used to be. My

friends helped me again and told me I needed to improve my shooting and dribbling. So I trained every day and started getting better. Eventually, I even started beating my friends in some games. They told me I should join their team, and I agreed. They gave me my jersey, and I played my first match with them. I was nervous, but I played really well.

We won that game 4–1, and I was so happy. We kept winning, and after a while, we made it to the finals against the best club. I was really nervous at the beginning, but I remembered what my friends told me about my skills and tried my best. It was a tough match because every time we scored, they scored right after. In the end, I assisted the last goal, and we won. While we were celebrating, I remembered the first time I ever played soccer. That day made me promise myself that I would keep working hard and chase my dream of becoming a professional soccer player.

OMER KHAN, GRADE 8

My Fishes

One day, it was my birthday, and I asked my parents for fish. They said okay and that it would be my birthday present. When we got there, I was so happy. I looked at the fish and wanted all of them, but my parents said I could only get 10, and I said okay.

On the day of my birthday, I woke up really early because I was excited. We went to the pet store with my mom, my dad, and my sister. We got 10 fish, a fish tank, and food. When I was 9 or 10 years old, I had 10 pet fish. Some of them were babies, and some of them were adults. The day we got them, they were so cute.

After a few days went by, some of the fish died. It was sad, but half of them lived. I had about six left. After about two months, we had to move to another place, and they said they had a pet policy. When we moved, we gave the fish to my aunt. She has five kids, and two days after we gave the fish to them, they killed all of them. They poked them until they died. I was so sad, and I couldn't stop crying.

After some days, we found out the pet policy was fake. We could have had fish, but mine were already dead. I was sad for a few days, but I learned my lesson: don't trust everyone. After that, I didn't want any more fish because it was traumatic, and I didn't want to go through that again. I just wanted my old fish back. My parents wanted me to get new fish because I couldn't get over my old ones, and one random day after work, my mom got me another fish. I was happy, but she knew I was still sad about my old fish.

NATALYE LOPEZ VASQUEZ, GRADE 8

The Magic Show

I went to a magic show with my friends at school, and we were really surprised because he did really cool magic tricks that blew my mind. The way I got the magic show ticket was by selling chocolate. I got a paper to sell chocolate bars, and I sold three boxes. I went door to door, and each chocolate bar cost \$2. Each box was \$60, and I sold three boxes so I could bring someone to the magic show. I brought my cousins with me.

Rick Smith Jr. did some amazing tricks on me. He guessed my crush and said he read my mind. Then he asked people if they were smarter than a kindergartener. He multiplied numbers quickly, threw cards across the whole stadium, and even mixed people's minds together. After the show, he took pictures with everyone and posted the trick he did with me. I felt really happy when they called me down because I was hoping he would do a magic trick with me, and he did.

It was my first magic show ever. After the show, everyone came up to me and asked who I liked and other questions about what happened. He said he was going to follow me back on Instagram. I was wondering how he even did the trick, so I texted him on Instagram. I said, "I would like to do a magic trick with you." I texted him multiple times, and on the second message, he finally saw it. He said, "Come up to me when I come to

your school, and then we can do a magic trick together if you want to.” I said sure and asked what day he was coming. He said Monday, but then he didn’t come. I asked again when he was coming. He said, “My bad, I couldn’t come on Monday because I didn’t feel good.” Then he said he was coming on Wednesday. He came on Wednesday and did a lot of cool magic tricks for everyone at the show. After that experience, I learned that I really love magic shows.

ENIS MAKA, GRADE 8

How Me and Edwin Started Dating

One day in fourth grade, we went to recess and played jump rope. We didn’t really talk much. We just competed to see who could go faster. Then, in sixth grade, I had him in my class, so I saw him every day. At that time, I didn’t like him. But in seventh grade, I suddenly started gaining feelings for him out of nowhere. I told one of my friends how I felt, but the next day she got mad at me, and we started arguing. Then she said out loud that I liked him, and he heard because he was outside with my cousin Luis.

One Friday, he added me on Snapchat, and I started sending him snaps. We slowly began talking, and about two weeks later, we started dating. At first, we barely talked and were kind of awkward, but we slowly got more comfortable. Now we are always with each other.

From that day on, we would sit together on the bus and talk a lot in homeroom. We were always playing around and joking with each other. He would walk me home and hug me. He would also walk around with me at school. We have P.E. together, and we ride the same bus, so I get to be with him most of the time.

Looking back at when we first started talking, I realized that I was very shy around him. I barely talked to him at first. I shouldn’t have been so shy. I should have talked to him more so we could get used to each other. Now we are very talkative. Every moment we spend together makes me think about all the memories we have, and I really hope we stay together.

SOPHIA MARTINEZ, GRADE 8

I Totally Messed Up

Hey, I’m Emerson, and I’m 14. This is the story about the time I totally messed up but somehow learned something important. It happened back when I was in 4th grade. My friends all seemed super cool by then, and I felt like I wasn’t. You know that feeling, right? Like you’re trying to fit in but just don’t know how. So, one day, I thought, “Hey, maybe if I bring a Nerf gun to the bus, I’ll look cool.” Genius idea, right?

So, I sneak the Nerf gun onto the bus, and I’m just waiting for the perfect moment to pull it out. Then, out of nowhere, I point it at a kid in 2nd grade, this totally innocent little guy. I don’t even remember what I said, but I was trying to act tough or funny or something.

The 2nd grader didn’t tell the bus driver right away, but later that same school day, he reported me to the principal. Before I knew it, the principal came to my class, took me out, and brought me to her office. She started looking through my backpack, and that’s when she found the Nerf gun.

She wasn’t happy, and she called my parents. When I got home that day, I got grounded for a month, maybe more. It was definitely not the cool moment I was hoping for. But what I really learned from that moment was simple: you just gotta be yourself. Trying too hard to be cool only causes problems, and being honest and real is way better in the long run.

EMERSON MARTINEZ CALDERON, GRADE 8



Metz Middle School student
presenting project story to
parents

Passing My SOL

I remember feeling happy when I passed my Reading SOL because in the past I had struggled to pass it. In 2024, I finally passed it. I remember feeling anxious that morning while getting ready for school. While I was in the car with my mom, I told her that I was nervous, and she said, "It's okay, don't be nervous." That didn't help much because I was still nervous.

When I got to school, I went to my homeroom. My teacher gave us our room numbers for our testing locations. Then I went to my testing room. There, I saw some familiar faces. My friend Ava was there, and she smiled at me. Soon after, we started getting ready to take the test.

The test had about 34 questions and many reading passages. I spent two hours working on it. After I finished, I went back to my third block. I didn't feel as nervous anymore because the test was over.

Two weeks later, my teacher called me up to her desk. I felt nervous again, but then she told me that I had passed. At that moment, I felt very happy. After school, when I got into the car, I told my mom that I had passed, and she was very happy for me.

ARIANA MELGAR-ALAS, GRADE 8

I Fell In The Pond

First, to begin with, when I was 8 years old, one day my mom got a call from one of her friends. Her friend asked if we could come to her house, and my mom agreed. After that, we got ready and went. I was excited because my mom's friend had children. I thought her son was cute, so I was excited to play with him. When we got to her house, we ate something with the family. The adults stayed inside talking while we went outside to play.

Next, we ran to the trampoline. We all played together and had fun joking around. Later, the boy, let's call him Danny, and I went to get water for everyone. We kept looking at each other because he had told me before that I was pretty. We got water for everybody and continued playing and having fun.

In the end, we all got bored, and Danny's sister had an idea to go to the pond. They had a small pond in their backyard with big rocks on the side. We all agreed to go, but since there was no entrance from their yard, we had to go through the neighbor's house, so we sneaked over there.

Eventually, we made it to the pond. We were walking carefully because at the end of the pond there was a big stone cave. It was creepy but interesting. I will never forget when, out of nowhere, I tripped on a big rock and fell into the pond. I got all wet in front of my crush. We were all surprised and started laughing, including me.

Despite that, we made it to the stone cave and then went back to the house. I dried off, and Danny helped me. From that day on, I always check where I step and try to be more careful.

NATHALY MENDOZA AREVALO, GRADE 8

How I Almost Died

One day, I didn't go to school because my mom had just had surgery. She had an appointment, and my sister stayed home with us so she could drive us there. Before we got into the car, I told my mom that I was hungry. She asked what I wanted to eat, and I said I didn't know and that I would decide after we dropped her off at her appointment.

After a long car ride, we finally arrived. My mom told my sister to stay with me and buy me food while she went to her appointment. My sister decided to go to Chipotle. When we got there, we needed to use the bathroom. My sister went first, and then we got in line. The line was short, so we ordered our food.

I told my sister that I wanted to eat in the car instead of inside, so we went to the car to eat. I was eating my bowl and had some chips. I was almost done eating when I took a big bite of a chip. I swallowed, and suddenly

I started to choke. At first, I thought it was fine and that if I swallowed harder, it would go down, but it didn't. It was hurting, and I started to panic.

My sister was next to me. I told her to help me because I couldn't breathe. I gave her my bowl and tried to take the food out of my throat. She started patting my back really hard, but it didn't work. I was really scared and thought I was going to die. Then I decided to put my finger in my mouth, and I managed to take the food out. I could breathe again, but some of the food still felt stuck in my throat, and it hurt to swallow. This experience taught me to eat more slowly and take small bites.

SUJEYLY MIRANDA GIRON, GRADE 8

The Last Day of 6th Grade

The last day of 6th grade was really good, and I still remember it clearly. Some reasons I liked the last day of 6th grade were the food, the fun activities, and the way everyone was acting like we wanted the day to last longer. One moment I remember clearly was when I first entered the classroom and everyone was bringing in food. There were many different types of food that students bought, including steak, Takis, Kool-Aid, and other snacks. It felt like a mini party in the morning. After we ate the food, we went to our encore class, which was Mr. Brunguard's STEM class. Mr. Brunguard brought out a Hot Wheels track and some cars along with it, and we all played with it like little kids again, even though we were getting older. After he put the track away, he took us to recess where we either played soccer or basketball. We stayed there for about 30 minutes before we had to go back inside. Then we went back to class and started getting ready for lunch. Lunch that day was okay, not the best, but we weren't really focused on the food anyway. Everyone was more focused on talking, laughing, and realizing that we were about to move on to the next grade.

After lunch, we went back to class to just talk and watch a movie while eating more food and chips. People were sharing snacks, trading things, and acting like the classroom was our own space for the last time. But after all that, we were getting ready for a big challenge where the winners could get a bunch of chips, candy, or small toys and prizes. We did a practice round first, and I even went up to try it even though it was just practice. One of the challenges included getting an Oreo from your forehead to your mouth without moving your head in any way. It had to stay on your forehead, and it was harder than it sounded. The second challenge was placing a popsicle stick on your mouth and stacking dice on top of it. You couldn't move your head or the dice would fall, and you would have to restart, which could set you behind other competitors. The third challenge involved balloons. There were balloons in the air, and you had to be blindfolded while trying to pop one with a needle. It could take a while because you had to find the balloon with your hands first and then try to pop it. The last challenge was figuring out which cup the ball was hiding under. All of these challenges were funny, stressful, and exciting at the same time. At the end, my group ended up losing, which was kind of sad, but we still ended up winning some chips. As the end of school got closer, people in my classroom started crying because it was the last day. Then we all boarded the bus, and on the bus even more people started crying because they felt sad that the school year was over. The emotions were real, and even people who usually didn't show feelings were quiet.

This moment was special to me for more than just the fun games and food. The last day of 6th grade felt like the end of something important, and I didn't fully understand that until later. The next year, when I entered 7th grade, I found out that my math and science teacher had left the school. His name was Mr. Lucas, and I will never forget him because he really made those classes better. But even worse than that was the next year when I entered 8th grade and I found out that my social studies and language skills teacher had also left. After that, I had no idea where they went, and it honestly surprised me how fast teachers and things can change. It made me realize that the last day of 6th grade was not just a fun day. It was the last time everything felt the same with the teachers and classmates I was used to. That is why I will always remember the last day of 6th grade.

MOHAMED MOHAMD MUKHTAR, GRADE 8

My First Pet

The first thing that happened when I got my dog was that my family and I named her Canela, which means cinnamon in English because she was brown. She was a small chihuahua mixed with a pug. I was really excited and happy because she was my first puppy. My parents bought all the supplies and a lot of toys for her. We took her to the vet and got all her shots.

We had her for about a week when she started crying and whining because she couldn't sleep. My sisters and I took turns helping her fall asleep every night. My life changed when I got her because I was the youngest out of my two siblings, so I finally had someone to play with. However, one day I saw her slowly falling off the couch. When I tried to help her and push her back up, she bit me really hard on my hand, and it started bleeding. After that day, I didn't want to play with Canela anymore.

One morning, I came downstairs because I was about to go to school, and suddenly Canela came running toward me and started biting my feet. I started crying, and because of that, I got to stay home that day. As time passed, Canela got bigger, but not that big because she was a chihuahua. One day, my parents decided to get her neutered. After she got neutered, she had to wear a cone, but she didn't want to wear it. We had to wrap her in a blanket so she wouldn't move. We also did that when we cut her nails because she would try to bite us. Since she was still little, she had really sharp but small teeth. The day after she got neutered, she was really weak and could barely walk, but she still wanted to play and be energetic. Because she would bite our furniture a lot, my parents bought her many chew toys and treats to keep her busy.

One day, my older sister and I were looking at pictures of other dogs, and we wanted to get a white husky. We planned to ask our parents, and when we did, they said no. First, they said it was too expensive. Second, they said we wouldn't get a big dog because it could hurt or even kill our chihuahua. I started crying and begging my parents, trying to convince them to get me a husky, but sadly, I never got one.

When Canela turned 4, I begged my parents to throw her a birthday party and invite people we knew who had dogs. We got her a lot of clothes and treats, and we even bought her a chocolate cake that was safe for dogs. After that day, Canela had many new things that lasted her about five months. To this day, I will never forget all the memories I have with my first dog and all the good times we shared. I hope she still has many more years to live.

ANGELINA POSADA TEJADA, GRADE 8

Track Tryouts

One day after school last year me and my friend Bella were talking then we thought of trying out for the track team because we were bored and had nothing to do at home. So the next day I talked to my parents about it then they brought me to the doctor and made an appointment to get a physical. After a week or so it was time for the tryouts so I put my track clothes under my school clothes and changed in the bathroom, then we started. Bella and I started to walk to the track field with the rest of the girls. A few minutes later after making it to the track field without warning everyone started running so Bella and I did the same and started to run. After that run we did around the track field we started to warm up for 15-30. After those few minutes we had a water break. Then we started to run the 100 meter run the people who did the 100 run drank water right after. Afterwards, Bella and I waited for the rest of the girls to finish. Right after they finished we went back to running after this we ran the 300, 400 and it was the same routine after each run which was to drink water. Bella and I were resting on the fence when she suddenly threw up.

The next day were tryouts again. We stayed after school, changed, went outside and started to run again. But this time we knew what was coming to us, so this time we controlled our breathing and drank less water.

This helped us a lot but it didn't change the exhaustion. After the first two days of the tryouts Bella and I felt soreness all over our legs but pushed through it. The day after I went to tryouts alone because Bella quit and I only found out while I was already stuck after school.

We practiced and did the same routine as usual run around, warmup the 100, 300 and 400 run with water breaks of course. The same day after tryouts, we met up with the coach in the lecture hall and he gave us all who stayed a paper filled with our meets and what schools we would go against. Obviously girls quit on the other days but here was about 30-37 girls on the team. My parents were so happy for me. But the thing is I didn't want to do track, My parents said that I had to do a sport that school year. I made the team but I quit afterwards because track wasn't the sport I really wanted to do. Instead of telling my parents straight up that I quit, I just told them they cut me off the team.

CARLIE REYES CALERO, GRADE 8

My Famous Story

Have you ever been to a magic show? I had my first experience this year. At my school, there was a magic show hosted by Rick Smith Jr. I got to attend by selling chocolate for the school fundraiser, and I was also invited by my friend named Dustin.

When I first arrived, I was excited to be there with my friends. I thought it was very fun, and I really enjoyed it. I would definitely go again with my friends. It was surprising because he did a bunch of amazing magic tricks. One of them was guessing my friend's crush even though he didn't know who she was or anything about her. I was so happy and excited. I was in a video, and it got 1,000 likes. I told my family to watch it.

It was a really good experience. I loved the tricks. One of the other tricks was when he had two balls and turned them into many before making them disappear. I was so surprised and happy. I would love to go to one of his shows again someday. I really looked up to him when he greeted me. I felt delighted because he is a famous role model, and it was my first time at a magic show. I even got a card to remember him.

One of the reasons I liked going to the magic show was because my friends were there with me. After the show, I was so excited because I knew I would be in the video. I told all my friends about the magic show. I realized that I love magic shows and spending time with my friends doing fun things together.

JACZON RIVERA GALEAS, GRADE 8

The Day I Started My Favorite Hobby.

One day, when I was about 5 years old, it all started when I went to the soccer field with my dad. The first thing that happened was that we watched a team play. The game started around 3 p.m., and there were about 25-30 players.

Then, it was halftime, and they had a water break. By then, it was about 3:45 p.m. After that, they continued playing, and that was when soccer started becoming my favorite hobby.

As time passed, the match was about to end, and we watched the last few minutes. A few minutes later, the game went to penalties. It was a crazy shootout, and the team was under a lot of pressure. Then a miracle happened. The team scored the winning goal and won the whole match. Soon after, we were about to leave, but we said "hi" to the players, and they greeted us back. After the match ended, my dad and I went out to eat.

In the end, I learned some important lessons, like always being confident even when you are losing and always being supportive of your teammates. I also realized that you should never give up and never show hatred toward other people. Finally, I went home with my dad and spent the rest of the day at home.

DARWIN SALVADOR HERNANDEZ, GRADE 8

The Beginning of a Big Change

To begin with, my past wasn't perfect or special, but when I found him, everything changed. It felt like my whole world shifted from a tiring life to a life filled with happiness and love. Some people might say it was just something to mess with my mind, but when he asked me to be his girlfriend with a bouquet of my favorite flowers, a basket of all my favorite chips, and a huge poster asking me to be his, my world completely changed.

As time passed, we reached our six-month anniversary. A couple of weeks later, it was late at night, and we couldn't see each other that day. Our parents were busy, and he had soccer practice. As I drifted off into a deep sleep, he called me and told me to come outside my house, but he never told me why.

As I stepped outside into the cold fall breeze, I saw him. A few minutes later, he approached me with outstretched arms, and I immediately ran into them, hugging him tightly. Soon after, I invited him inside my cozy, warm house. I stole a couple of glances his way and realized he was freezing, so I gave him a heavy, cozy blanket. He pulled me in close, and we shared a kiss. Afterwards, we lay on the couch and fell asleep together while he was still holding me in his arms.

In the end, he had to leave. It wasn't easy to let him go, but he eventually had to. I walked him outside to his car, and before he left, we shared a tight hug. Looking back, I realized how much his presence meant to me. Every memory and moment we created together is something we both cherish. We knew that nothing could keep us apart.

Looking back, I wish I could have spent more time with him and created even more memories. No matter how much time we spend together, we always miss each other in the end. Missing each other is the hardest part of our relationship, but being with him is the greatest blessing.

ARELY SEJAS MOYA, GRADE 8

Luciana Bianchi,
ELD 2 - 7th and 8th Grades

My 12th Birthday

First, we went to the store to buy decorations, but I didn't know anything because no one had congratulated me. However, they couldn't hide their surprise, and I found out because I'm a gossip. Afterward, we went to wait in the car, and I started going through the bags. My aunt and uncle were arriving and scolded me, but then we went home.

We arrived, and then my aunt told us to find the stove because she needed space for the party. We started decorating, and then I went up to my aunt's room. I didn't know anything at all and had to act surprised. My mom arrived home, and they called me downstairs. I went downstairs and acted surprised, and my mom congratulated me, and then the party started. She started singing "Las Mañanitas" to me, and it was time to blow out the candles, and I had to bite into the cake.

Shortly after, they threw foam, and then we ate cake, and my aunts started fighting and pulling each other's hair, and then the house was filled with cake. My aunt scolded us because we made a mess in the house and we started cleaning.

Mi cumpleaños número 12

Primero salimos a la tienda a comprar decoración, pero yo no sabía nada porque nadie me había felicitado. Sin embargo, no supieron ocultar la sorpresa y yo me entere por chismosa. Después nos fuimos a esperar en el carro y me puse a revisar las bolsas. Mis tíos iban llegando y me regañaron pero después nos fuimos a casa.

Llegamos y después mi tía nos dijo que buscáramos la estufa porque necesitaba espacio para la fiesta. Empezamos a decorar y después subí al cuarto de mi tía. No sabía nada de nada y me tenía que hacer la

sorprendida. Mi mamá llegó a la casa y me llamaron para que bajara. Bajé y me hice la sorprendida y mi mamá me felicitó, y después empezó la fiesta. Empezó a cantarme las mañanitas y era hora de soplar las velas y tenía que morder el pastel.

Poco después lanzaron espuma y después comimos pastel y mis tías se empezaron a pelear y jalar del pelo y después se llenó la casa de pastel. Mi tía nos regañó porque llegamos a ensuciar la casa y nos pusimos a limpiar.

ANGELICA JIMENEZ CARDENAS, GRADE 7

My Memories

I still remember when I used to go outside to play with ATVs, and we also played with bicycles in the street.

I also remember when I received the news that my grandmother had passed away. The day before, I had stayed overnight at my aunt's house. When I woke up, I played and ate.

In the afternoon, my grandparents on my mother's side gathered my things and we went back to my house. My parents talked to me about my grandmother's passing.

Mis recuerdos

Todavía me acuerdo cuando salía de mi casa a jugar con cuatrimotos y también jugábamos con bicicletas en la calle.

También me acuerdo cuando me dieron la noticia de que mi abuela había fallecido. El día anterior me había quedado a dormir en la casa de mi tía. Al despertar, jugué y comí.

En la tarde mis abuelos maternos agarraron mis cosas y nos regresamos a mi casa. Mis papás platicaron conmigo sobre el fallecimiento de mi abuela.

DEREK OLVERA VAZQUEZ, GRADE 8

Memories

I still remember the day my grandmother died. My family and I were at the house in El Salvador.

My grandfather lived near our house. He called us and told us my granny had died. We were very sad and scared.

What I miss most about my grandmother is that she was a good person. She also loved to bake cookies, and they were very good.

Recuerdos

Todavía me acuerdo el día que murió mi abuela. Estábamos mi familia y yo en nuestra casa en El Salvador.

Mi abuelo vivía cerca. Él nos contó por teléfono que mi abuela se había muerto. Nos sentimos muy tristes, y a la vez asustados.

Lo que más extraño de mi abuela es que era buena gente. Además le gustaba hornear galletas y eran muy buenas.

GERSON AREVALO RODRIGUEZ, GRADE 7

My Dear Pinula

I still remember when I lived in Pinula, a small city. I lived with my mom . My mom sold tamales and I went with her to help.

Pinula was very fun. I went out with my friends, and we made mango salad. We rode bikes, and I did "cabaito" with the bike. I was happy.

Pinula is important for me because I grew up and I lived my childhood there. What I miss the most about Pinula is my friends, granizadas, tacos, the rivers, my grandmother, my family, smoothies and chicken sandwiches.

Mi querida Pinula

Todavía recuerdo cuando vivía en Pinula, un pueblo pequeño. Vivía con mi mamá. Mi mamá vendía tamales y yo la acompañaba para ayudarla.

Pinula era muy divertido. Salía con mis amigos, y preparábamos ensalada de mango. Andábamos en bicicleta, y yo hacía caballito con la mía. Era feliz.

Pinula es importante para mí porque crecí y viví mi infancia allí.

Lo que más extraño de Pinula son mis amigos, los tacos, los ríos, mi abuela, mi familia, los batidos y los sándwiches de pollo.

GREYVI GARCIA LAZO, GRADE 7

My Scars

My First Scar

I was about 6 years old and riding my new bicycle with my cousin. I asked him, "Do you want to go up a hill so you can ride my bike?" and he said yes. So we went up the hill, which was very steep, and as we rode down, we went very fast. At the bottom of the hill there was a barrier, and I had used the bike before. However, this time my cousin was sitting on the frame, and as we were going down, a car was coming from above and another from below, so we decided to crash into the barrier instead of getting run over. Because we were going so fast, I got a scar on my lip and my cousin got one on his forehead.

My Second Scar

I remember I was riding my bike down a hill from a mountain, but the brakes failed and I couldn't stop. So I went to a place where there were rocks to try and slow the bike down. However, I didn't see a big rock and I went straight down and I got a scar on my head.

When a dog bit my forehead

I had a dog, and I was playing with him. I wasn't afraid of him because he was my trusted dog. But one day we were playing normally, and I was feeding him when suddenly he jumped on me and started biting my forehead several times. I couldn't move him off me until my dad came up and pulled him off me.

My fourth scar: leaving my cousin in Mexico

I have a cousin who's 1 year younger than me, so we grew up together. We ran around together, threw rocks together, broke windows and ran away. We even fought until we bled, but the next day we were like brothers. Then the day came when I had to come to the United States. Supposedly, he was going to come too, but his dad didn't want him to. He cried, and we had to go our separate ways.

Mis cicatrices

Mi primer cicatriz

Tenía unos 6 años y usaba mi bicicleta nueva con mi primo. Le pregunté: "¿Quieres subir una cuesta para usar mi bicicleta?" y dijo que sí. Así que subimos la cuesta, que era muy grande, y mientras íbamos en bicicleta, bajamos muy rápido. Al final de la cuesta había una barrera y en una ocasión usé la bicicleta. Sin embargo, esta vez mi primo estaba delante del cuadro, mientras íbamos, venía un coche por arriba y otro por abajo, así que decidimos chocar contra la barrera en lugar de que me atropellaran. Como íbamos tan rápido, me quedó una cicatriz en el labio y mi primo otra en la frente.

Mi segunda cicatriz

Recuerdo que bajaba en bicicleta por una montaña, pero fallaron los frenos y no pude parar. Así que fui a un lugar donde había rocas para intentar frenar, pero no vi ninguna roca grande y me fui directo al suelo, donde me quedó una cicatriz en la cabeza.

Cuando un perro me mordió la frente

Tenía un perro y jugaba con él. No le tenía miedo porque era mi perro de confianza. Pero un día jugábamos con normalidad y le daba de comer cuando, de repente, me saltó encima y empezó a mordirme la frente varias veces. No pude quitármelo de encima hasta que mi papá se acercó y me lo quitó.

Mi cuarta cicatriz: dejar a mi primo en México.

Tengo un primo un año menor que yo, así que crecimos juntos. Corríamos juntos, nos lanzábamos piedras, rompíamos ventanas y huíamos. Incluso nos peleábamos hasta sangrar, pero al día siguiente éramos como hermanos. Entonces llegó el día en que tuve que venir a Estados Unidos. Supuestamente él también iba a venir, pero su papá no quería. Lloró y tuvimos que separarnos.

JESUS GARCIA PONCE, GRADE 8

When I Was Little

My happiest memory was when my dad was still alive. Well, I only knew him through video calls, because when he came to the United States, I was still very young. That's why my childhood wasn't like that of a normal child. I lived with my aunt and my great-grandmother.

My worst day was when my dad passed away. Afterward, my brother and I came to the United States to have a better life with my uncle. In 2023, we moved here, and I lived with my uncle for a year. Then I came to Virginia with my brother because he had a girlfriend. Since he went to live with her, and since his girlfriend's mother was supporting them, he also came to live with them.

After about four months, my brother came to pick me up from my uncle's house, and everything went back to normal. But recently, my brother and his girlfriend broke up because they were having problems. It made me sad because they were a good couple. They talked things out and now they're friends, but it's not the same as before, and my brother always tells me, "We're moving." But he never does, and I don't want to leave because I've gotten used to being here, and I can't imagine making new friends again, because it's difficult.

Cuando era pequeño

Mi recuerdo más feliz fue cuando mi papá aún estaba vivo. Bueno, solo lo conocí por videollamada, porque cuando él se vino para los Estados Unidos yo aún era pequeño. Por eso mi infancia no fue como la de un niño normal. Vivía con mi tía y mi bisabuela.

Mi peor día fue cuando falleció mi papá. Después, mi hermano y yo vinimos a Estados Unidos para tener una vida mejor con mi tío. En 2023, nos mudamos aquí y viví con mi tío un año. Luego me vine a Virginia con mi hermano porque él tenía novia. Como él vino a vivir con ella, y como la madre de su novia los mantenía, él también vino a vivir con ellos.

Después de unos cuatro meses, mi hermano vino a buscarme a casa de mi tío, y todo volvió a la normalidad. Pero hace poco, mi hermano y su novia terminaron porque tenían problemas. Me entristeció porque hacían buena pareja. Lo hablaron y ahora son amigos, pero ya no es lo mismo que antes, y mi hermano siempre me dice: "Nos mudamos". Pero nunca lo hace, y yo no quiero irme porque me he acostumbrado a estar aquí, y no me imagino haciendo nuevos amigos de nuevo, porque es difícil.

LUIS ARGUETA GRIJALVA, GRADE 8

The Girl Who Learned to Love Alone

Excerpt

“When the day came to come to the United States, my heart was torn. I was leaving my grandmother, but going to where my mother was. Pain behind me... ahead, but also a glimmer of hope. Over time, my sisters gradually accepted me. And now almost my entire family is here. Now we are a family, but I still wonder why my father never loved me, what wrong I did. What mistake did I make in his eyes? Sometimes I think that’s just how life is... cruel, unfair. But I also believe that this pain made me stronger. And today I understand what I couldn’t see before: it wasn’t my fault, it never was. I wasn’t a mistake, I was just a child searching for love in a heart incapable of giving it. I learned to survive with an absence, to seek love from those who could give it. And although I grew strong, a void remains inside me that no one can fill. A child who always wanted to be loved by her father and never was. Today I chose myself, but I can’t help but cry for what I never had. And will never have.”

THE END

La niña que aprendió a amar sola

“Cuando llegó el día de venir a los Estados Unidos, mi corazón estaba dividido. Dejaba a mi abuela, pero iba para donde mi mamá. Dolor atrás... adelante, pero también una pequeña esperanza. Con el tiempo mis hermanas me fueron aceptando poco a poco. Y ahora casi toda mi familia está aquí. Ahora somos una familia pero todavía me pregunto por qué mi papá nunca me quiso, qué fue el mal que hice. Qué error presente para él. A veces pienso que la vida es así... de cruel, injusta. Pero también creo que este dolor me hizo más fuerte. Y hoy entiendo lo que antes no podía ver: no fue mi culpa, nunca lo fue. Yo no era un error, solo era una niña buscando amor en un corazón incapaz de darlo. Aprendí a sobrevivir con una ausencia a buscar amor en quienes sí podían darlo. Y aunque crecí fuerte, dentro de mí quedó un vacío que nadie podrá llenar. Una niña que siempre quiso ser amada por su padre y que jamás lo fue. Hoy me elijo a mí pero no puedo evitar llorar por lo que nunca tuve. Y nunca tendré.”

FIN

MARIA ALVARADO GOMEZ, GRADE 8

My Life

When I was little, my mom would leave me alone with my aunt, and I wasn’t with my mom or my sister very much because my sister was sick a lot, and sometimes I would go three or four days without seeing my mom. From then on, I learned to be alone, but when I was with my mom and sister, I wasn’t happy, even though I wanted to be with them when they weren’t there. I always felt sad, and my dad was hardly ever home because he had to work, and sometimes he would come back after a week, and I didn’t see him much.

After a few years, my great-grandfather passed away, and I cried inconsolably day and night. My comfort was being with my favorite person, which is my cousin. A few years after that tragedy, my dad decided to come to the U.S.A. I was about 8 years old when my dad left, and I cried a lot, but I knew that it wouldn’t affect my life much without him. I already knew how to live without him, but I still felt sad and heartbroken.

About a year after he left, I had an accident and had to have surgery on my appendix, and I had to spend almost four months recovering. During those months, it was my sister’s birthday, and I couldn’t celebrate that special day with her. A few months later, my sister got sick, and my mom took her to the doctor a lot, but they couldn’t find anything wrong with her, but she was getting worse every day. I got sadder every day because she wasn’t getting better, and one day they operated on her appendix by mistake, and she was still the same even though they kept taking her to the doctor.

After about two years, my mom and dad decided that we had to come to the U.S.A., and that news made me very sad because I didn't want to leave, but I liked being with my family. After a few days, I said goodbye to my family, and a day after we left, we arrived at the border of Guatemala and Mexico, and we stayed in Mexico for about nine days. On the tenth day, we arrived at the border of Mexico and the U.S.A., and then we stayed for 3 days in a shelter. After that, I took two planes to get to where my dad was, and he received me with my aunt. It was a very beautiful and sad reunion, but in the end I arrived with my father and now I'm with him.

Mi vida

Cuando era pequeña, mi mamá me dejaba sola con mi tía, y no pasaba mucho tiempo con mi mamá ni con mi hermana porque mi hermana estaba muy enferma, y a veces pasaba tres o cuatro días sin ver a mi mamá. Desde entonces, aprendí a estar sola, pero cuando estaba con mi mamá y mi hermana, no era feliz, aunque quería estar con ellas cuando no estaban. Siempre me sentía triste, y mi papá casi nunca estaba en casa porque tenía que trabajar, y a veces regresaba después de una semana, y no lo veía mucho.

Después de unos años, mi bisabuelo falleció, y lloré desconsoladamente día y noche. Mi consuelo era estar con mi persona favorita, que es mi prima. Unos años después de esa tragedia, mi papá decidió venir a Estados Unidos. Yo tenía unos 8 años cuando mi papá se fue, y lloré mucho, pero sabía que su ausencia no afectaría mucho mi vida. Ya sabía cómo vivir sin él, pero aun así me sentía triste y desconsolada.

Aproximadamente un año después de que se fuera, tuve un accidente y tuvieron que operarme de apendicitis, y tuve que pasar casi cuatro meses recuperándome. Durante esos meses, fue el cumpleaños de mi hermana, y no pude celebrar ese día especial con ella. Unos meses después, mi hermana se enfermó, y mi mamá la llevaba mucho al médico, pero no encontraban nada malo, pero ella empeoraba cada día. Yo me ponía más triste cada día porque no mejoraba, y un día la operaron de apendicitis por error, y seguía igual a pesar de que la seguían llevando al médico.

Después de unos dos años, mi mamá y mi papá decidieron que teníamos que venir a Estados Unidos, y esa noticia me puso muy triste porque no quería irme, pero me gustaba estar con mi familia. Después de unos días, me despedí de mi familia, y un día después de irnos, llegamos a la frontera de Guatemala y México, y nos quedamos en México durante unos nueve días. Al décimo día, llegamos a la frontera entre México y Estados Unidos, y luego nos quedamos tres días en un albergue. Después de eso, tomé dos aviones para llegar a donde estaba mi papá, y él me recibió junto con mi tía. Fue un reencuentro muy hermoso y emotivo, pero al final logré reunirme con mi padre y ahora estoy con él.

ORALIA RAMIREZ QUINONEZ, GRADE 8

The Second Time's the Charm

When I was 8 years old, my mom started thinking about going to the United States. I don't remember why, but she seemed very determined. She wanted to go alone; that was the main idea. But I jokingly told her I wanted to go with her. She, now serious, asked me if I was really committed to going with her, knowing what I would have to face and what I would have to do. After thinking about it a lot, I decided to go with her, even though it clearly hurt to have to leave my other family and my pets. The day we left, many people cried and blessed us.

The journey had begun. We went through many things, not all easy and not all difficult. I was partly very excited to have an "adventure" with many obstacles and challenges. Time passed, in my opinion, too slowly. When we finally managed to enter the United States, they kept us in the infamous "iceboxes" for a few days, maybe a week. The immigration officials weren't telling us anything and weren't saying what was going to happen to us. When my mom went to ask, she said we'd already been there for more than three days. The agents whispered

to each other, something like, “They can’t be here for more than three days, we have to send them somewhere.” We expected them to send us back to Guatemala, but we were wrong.

They sent us to Reynosa, Mexico. We didn’t know anything and we were very scared because of many things they had told us. My mom and I were very lucky because God put many good people in our lives who helped us get back to Guatemala. Two years later, when I was ten, my mom was going to leave again, this time pregnant and without me. When I turned twelve, I wrote to my mom saying I wanted to go with her. She said I could, since my uncles were thinking of going too, but I had to be absolutely sure. I said yes without thinking much, and they quickly told me we’d be leaving the next day. After a long time and going through many things, we finally managed to enter the U.S.A., and this time I was able to stay. That’s how I ended up here now.

La segunda es la vencida

Cuando yo tenía 8 años mi mamá empezó con la idea de irse a Estados Unidos. No recuerdo porque, pero se veía muy decidida. Ella quería irse sola, esa era la idea principal, pero yo bromeando le dije que quería irme con ella. Ella, ya seria, me pregunto si realmente estaba decidida a pasar con ella sabiendo a lo que me tendría que enfrentar y lo que debería de hacer. Yo después de pensarlo mucho me decidí a ir con ella aunque claramente me dolía tener que dejar a mi demás familia y a mis mascotas. El día en que nos fuimos muchas personas lloraron y nos bendijeron.

El viaje había comenzado. Pasamos muchas cosas, no todas fáciles y no todas difíciles. En parte yo estaba muy emocionada de tener una “aventura” con muchos obstáculos y retos. El tiempo pasó, según yo, demasiado lento. Cuando por fin logramos entrar a Estados Unidos nos tuvieron en las famosas “hieleras” por unos días, quizás una semana. Los de migración no nos decían nada y no nos indicaban que iba a pasar con nosotras. Cuando mi mama fue a preguntar dijo que ya habíamos estado ahí más de 3 días. Los agentes susurraron entre sí, algo así como “No pueden llevar más de 3 días aquí, tenemos que enviarlas a algún lado”. Nosotras esperábamos que con eso se refirieran a mandarnos de regreso a Guatemala, pero estábamos equivocadas.

Nos mandaron para Reynosa, México. Nosotras no conocíamos nada y estábamos muy asustadas por muchas cosas que nos habían dicho. Mi mama y yo tuvimos mucha suerte, ya que Dios puso a muchas buenas personas en nuestra vida que nos ayudaron a volver a Guatemala. 2 años después cuando tenía 10 años mi mamá iba a volver a irse, esta vez embarazada y sin mí. Cuando cumplí los 12 años le escribí a mi mamá que quería ir con ella, me dijo que sí podría ya que mis tíos estaban pensando en irse también, pero tenía que estar muy segura. Dije que sí sin pensarlo mucho, y rápidamente me dijeron que al día siguiente nos iríamos. Después de mucho tiempo pasando por varias cosas logramos entrar a U.S.A y esta vez sí pude quedarme, así es como ahora estoy aquí.

SUSAN CHIVALAN GUARDADO, GRADE 8

Campero Tree

I still remember when I went to the arbol campero with my family in 2020. It was so much fun and impressive.

The arbol campero is a tree so big and illuminated. They turn on the tree lights two days before Christmas.

When I went I set off fireworks in the tree and the security caught me. I love the part when they turned on the tree and set off the fireworks.

Arbol Campero

Todavía recuerdo cuando fui al árbol campero con mi familia en el 2020. Fue muy divertido e impresionante.

El árbol campero es un árbol enorme e iluminado. Se enciende dos días antes de Navidad.

Cuando fui, encendí fuegos artificiales en el árbol y la seguridad me atrapó. Me encanta la parte cuando encendieron el árbol y los fuegos artificiales.

WILLIAM MONROY RODRIGUEZ, GRADE 7

*Luciana Bianchi,
ELD 1 - 7th and 8th Grades*

Chilaquiles Easy Recipe

INGREDIENTS

Fried tortilla
Serrano chilly
Onion, garlic, oil
Cheese
Cilantro
“Lala” cream

INSTRUCTIONS:

First, I fry the tortilla.

Next, I put the green tomatoes and garlic in the blender.

Then, I add onions, serrano pepper and a splash of water.

After that, I add cilantro, red onion, cheese and Lala cream.

Last, I eat and enjoy.

Memories

I like chilaquiles, they remind me of all the mornings before school.

My mum makes the best chilaquiles in the world. I used to eat chilaquiles every morning before going to the cerro in Mexico.

Receta Fácil: Chilaquiles

INGREDIENTES:

Tortilla frita
Chile serrano
Cebolla, ajo, aceite
Queso
Cilantro
Crema “Lala”

INSTRUCCIONES:

Primero, frito la tortilla.

Después, pongo los tomates verdes y el ajo en la licuadora.

Después, añado la cebolla, el chile serrano y un chorrito de agua.

Después, añado el cilantro, la cebolla morada, el queso y la crema Lala.

Por último, como y disfruto.

Recuerdos

Me gustan los chilaquiles; me recuerdan todas las mañanas antes de ir a la escuela.

Mi mamá hace los mejores chilaquiles del mundo. Solía comer chilaquiles todas las mañanas antes de ir al cerro en México.

EDDY CARDOSO BARRAGAN, GRADE 7

Agashe Recipe

Ingredients:

meat and chicken

peanut butter

flour

Dried bread crumbs
corlander
salt
Turmeric OR paprika
fennel
Ginger

Steps:
1) First, I cut the chicken.
2) Then, I mix fennel, paprika, flour, peanut butter, salt, ginger, and breadcrumbs.
3) Next, I fry the chicken.
4) Last, I eat and enjoy.

Agashe Memories

The agashe reminds me of Sudan because it's a typical food there.
My mum makes the best agashe in the world. All my family and I used to eat agashe every Friday at my parents' house. I love my mum's agashe so much!

وصفة أغاشي
المكونات:
لحم ودجاج
زبدة الفول السوداني
دقيق
بقسماط مجفف
مصفاة
ملح
كركم أو بابريكا

شمر
زنجبيل
الخطوات:
1) أولاً، أقطع الدجاج.
2) ثم أخلط الشمر، البابريكا، الدقيق، زبدة الفول السوداني، الملح، الزنجبيل، والبقسماط.
3) بعد ذلك، أقلي الدجاج.
4) أخيراً، أتناوله وأستمتع به.

ذكريات الأغاشي

يذكرني الأغاشي بالسودان لأنه طبق تقليدي هناك.
تُعدّ والدتي أشهى أغاشي في العالم. اعتدت أنا وعائلتي تناول الأغاشي كل جمعة في منزل والدي. أحب أغاشي والدتي كثيراً!

HANI MAHMOUD, GRADE 8

Recipe: Pupusas

INGREDIENTS

flour
salt
cabbage
onion
beans
meat
tomato sauce
smoked sauce
pickles

INSTRUCTIONS:

First, I add the flour for the dough.
Then, I add water and knead it, and then it's ready to start filling it.
Next, I make the curtido (pickled cabbage) so that when the pupusas are made, I can add the curtido on top of the pupusas.
Last, once the pupusas are ready, I make the tomato sauce for them.

When the pupusas come out of the kitchen they are ready to enjoy.

Memories

The pupusas salvadoreñas remind me of El Salvador, because they're a typical food there. My mum makes the best pupusas in the world.

I used to eat pupusas every Sunday at my parents' house. I miss my mum's pupusas so much! She's in El Salvador.

Receta: Pupusas

INGREDIENTES

harina
sal
repollo
cebolla
frijoles
carne
salsa de tomate
salsa ahumada
pepinillos

INSTRUCCIONES:

Primero, agrego la harina para la masa.
Luego, agrego agua y la amaso, y ya está lista para empezar a rellenarla.
Después, preparo el curtido (repollo encurtido) para que, cuando las pupusas estén listas, pueda agregarlo encima.
Por último, una vez que las pupusas están listas, preparo la salsa de tomate.
Cuando las pupusas salen de la cocina, están listas para disfrutar.

Recuerdos

Las pupusas salvadoreñas me recuerdan a El Salvador, porque son una comida típica de allí. Mi mamá hace las mejores pupusas del mundo.

Solía comer pupusas todos los domingos en casa de mis padres. ¡Extraño mucho las pupusas de mi mamá! Ella está en El Salvador.

JERONIMO BERRIOS ORELLANA, GRADE 7

Recipe: Baleadas

Ingredients:

tortilla
beans
cheese
cream

Instructions:

First, I fry the beans and tortilla.
Then, I grate the cheese.
Last , I fill the tortilla with the beans and the cheese and cream.

Memories

The baleada reminds me of Honduras because it's a typical food there. My mum makes the best baleada in the world. All my family and I used to eat baleadas every Friday at my parent's home .I love my mom's baleadas so much.

Receta: Baleadas

Ingredientes:

Tortilla
Frijoles
Queso
Crema

Instrucciones:

Primero, frito los frijoles y la tortilla.
Luego, rallo el queso.
Por último, relleno la tortilla con los frijoles, el queso y la crema.

Recuerdos

La baleada me recuerda a Honduras porque es una comida típica de allí. Mi mamá hace la mejor baleada del mundo. Mi familia y yo solíamos comer baleadas todos los viernes en casa de mis padres. Me encantan las baleadas de mi mamá.

JUAN MEJIA OSEGUERA, GRADE 8

Pupusas Recipe

Ingredients:

cheese

Refried beans

seasoned pork (chicharron)

Loroco (traditional Salvadorian)

Other options include squash, chicken, or jalapeño peppers

Steps:

First, I make the dough with water, salt, and flour.

Then, I simmer the beans.

Next, I simmer the chicharrones.

Then, I cut the cheese.

Next, I wash the lorocos (optional).

Then, I cut the vegetables (cabbage, onion, carrot).

After that, I add vinegar.

Then, I fill the pupusa and add a little oil.

Last, I cook the pupusa in the pan, eat and enjoy!! Uhhh!

Memories

Pupusas remind me of El Salvador, because it's a typical food there. My mum makes the best pupusas in the world. All my family and I used to eat pupusas every Friday at my parents' home. I love my mum's pupusas so much!

Receta de Pupusas

Ingredientes:

Queso

Frijoles refritos

Chicharrón

Loroco (tradicional salvadoreño)

Otras opciones incluyen calabaza, pollo o jalapeños

Pasos:

Primero, hago la masa con agua, sal y harina.

Luego, cocino los frijoles a fuego lento.

Luego, cocino los chicharrones a fuego lento.

Luego, corto el queso.

Después, lavo los lorocos (opcional).

Después, corto las verduras (repollo, cebolla, zanahoria).

Después, le agrego vinagre.

Luego, relleno la pupusa y le agrego un poco de aceite.

Por último, cocino la pupusa en la sartén, ¡a comer y a disfrutar! ¡Umm!

Recuerdos

Las pupusas me recuerdan a El Salvador, porque es una comida típica de allí. Mi mamá hace las mejores pupusas del mundo. Mi familia y yo solíamos comer pupusas todos los viernes en casa de mis padres. ¡Me encantan las pupusas de mi mamá!

OWEN ABARCA RIVERA, GRADE 7

Greendale Elementary School

My Family

My family is nice.
I have my mom, my dad, and my “nice” brother.
My mom works at a dialysis clinic in Kingsport.
My dad works at home.
My brother goes to school with me.
I am in 4th grade my brother is in 5th grade.
My family is good.
My grandpa was in the Vietnam War.
I love my family.
My family is the best!

AMELIA BARNUM, GRADE 4

My Family

I have a wonderful family.
I have a small family.
I have a sister.
My mom is a nurse.
My dad is a soccer coach.
My family is very supportive and caring.
I have a cat whose name is KitKat.
I had a dog and his name was Shali.
I love my family a lot.
I’m glad I have this family.

GRAYSON BARNUM, GRADE 5

Celebrating Day of the Dead

Ever since I was four and my family moved to Mexico, we have been celebrating Day of the Dead, or Día de los Muertos. It is a Mexican holiday to celebrate the lives of the people in your family who have passed away. It takes place on the day after Halloween. It makes me very sad that I moved away, but I still remember it by celebrating this special holiday.

One thing that people do for Día de los Muertos is they put up an ofrenda. It is a table the size of a piano with two small shelves on top. People sometimes put flowers on them, but their main purpose is to put up pictures of your loved ones who have gone to heaven. It is a very important part of the Day of the Dead, and it is thought that your loved ones visit you through their pictures on the ofrenda.

One Day Of The Dead dessert is a sugar skull. It is an edible decoration that people enjoy in Mexico, made out of sugar paste, meringue powder, and water, to mold it into a skull shape. It is decorated with bright icing to make it colorful, and mostly, just beautiful. They are very pretty, and I remember that I loved their appearance and taste.

Overall, I think that Día de los Muertos is a really great holiday. It is very important to me. I still celebrate this holiday every year, and it is a key element in my life. I love this holiday.

HARPER BOND, GRADE 5

The Interview

Family members who work with you are: Rosey, Nina, Will, Larry

What is your full name? James Zikkus Owens

How did you get started in the upholstery business? I learned to sew. I met a guy who needed some work done for the Department of Agriculture. I did a load of furniture for them and then it snowballed from there.

How long have you worked in this industry? 40 years

What is your favorite part of this industry? Making money

What are some names of local businesses that you have provided your services to?

McDonald's, Dairy Queen, Michael's Pharmacy, Abingdon High School, Interior decorators

Is it true that you did work for the White House? Yes

What service did you provide to the White House? Upholstery, Refinishing, George Bush

Desk as vice president, and George Washington Carver Wagon

How did it make you feel to provide services to the white house? It was exciting.

Did this help your business grow? Yes

Is this a family-owned business? Yes

Who will take over after you retire? Will

Can you teach me when I get older? Yes

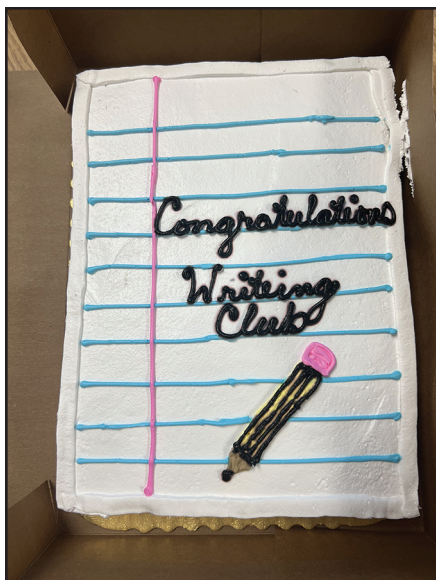
LANE GENTRY, GRADE 5

Uncle

My name is Blake Gilliam. In my family, I have two siblings. My brother is 19 years old and his name is Noah. My sister's name is Alex. She's 17. My mom is 45 and her name is Amber, and my dad is 48 and his name is Matthew, but he is mostly referred to as Matt.

My great uncle's name is Hubert Quinten Gilliam. He had three brothers, two of them were always called Raymen and DK however, Rayman died young and did not serve. And the other one was my great-grandpa, Thaddeus E. Evans Gilliam. My great-uncle was a B-12 Bomber pilot who got shot down over Germany and was imprisoned in a concentration camp. Days later, he was broken out by a small group of Russian soldiers, but at that time they would have been called Soviets, because at that time they were the Soviet Union. He stayed with a group of his Russian liberators and raided lots of museums. Some of his treasures included a chest of Roman coins and a Napoleon painting and many more fascinating treasures. But going back to the beginning of the war, he was a co-pilot with my great-grandpa, then they found out they were brothers and separated them. Moving back further into his service, he joined the army at fifteen, fresh out of high school. That is three years underage, and even his commanding officer didn't know that he was underage for a while. He was actually interviewed by the Kingsport Times-News and you can find it on YouTube. It is a very old video and there is background noise and he is a quiet speaker so make sure you turn up your volume. It's a long video, so grab your popcorn. He also always called my grandpa Timmy but his name is Tim. My mother said he was a nice person and when they met, he already had a wife and kids.

BLAKE GILLIAM, GRADE 5



My Family

My family is amazing.
One of my family members lives in Kentucky.
I live with my mom and go to my dad's on Friday.
My brother is annoying and in 7th grade.
I was born in Kentucky, then moved to Tennessee,
then to VA.
I have 4 mammaws.
I have 4 papaws.
3 uncles passed away.
My uncle lives in Tennessee and was in the army. His
name is LJ.
I love to play 99 Night in the forest on Roblox.

BRENLYN KING, GRADE 5

I AM

I am Lily Krieger
Proud of all said.
Playing out in the sun.

I am Lily Krieger
My life journey starts
in South Carolina.
Where hurricane Mathew
was taking place.

I am Lily Krieger.
Half of my life was
spent in the place I
called home.

I am Lily Krieger.
In 2021 my journey
to Virginia has only
begun.

I am Lily Krieger.
In Virginia, it was going to be my
first time in public
school.

I am Lily Krieger.
I hated first grade because
of the "mean" kids bullying me.

I am Lily Krieger.

I loved second grade because the
so-called “mean kids turned nice.”

I am Lily Krieger.
Third and Fourth grade
We’re about the same with hard challenges calling my name.

I am Lily Krieger.
Ten years old having fun
Playing out in the sun
Proud of all said.
Proud of all done.

LILY KRIEGER, GRADE 5



Greendale Writing Club with TOP Journals

My Family That I Love!

My family makes me happy!
My family loves me.
My parents make good food.
I have 5 family members.
I have a big brother and a little sister.
I have a mom and a dad.
I have a puppy named Tipsy.
I have a cat named Tigger.
I have a pool, which is deflated sadly.
I was born in Iowa!
I am grateful to have an awesome family and have pets that are so adorable!

REBEKAH LAWRENCE, GRADE 5

My Family's Camping Tradition

Every year, my great aunt, my great uncle, my mom, my cousins, my sisters, and I go camping. We usually go camping at Riverside Campground on the 4th of July. Also, there are multiple places to bike with a friend.

Some of the things we do are swimming, fishing, playing at the arcade, and hanging around the campfire roasting s'mores. My family and I love to go camping at Riverside Campground!

MAGGIE MELVIN, GRADE 5

My Family

My family is enormous.
I'm happy that I have such a big family.
I have 4 grandparents, way too many cousins to count, one brother, and two parents.
 My mom stays back at the farm.
My dad works at the post office.
My cousin, Jake, works at Lowe's.
My aunt, Jaylen, works at one of the libraries in Denver.
 My cousin Eli goes to Greendale.
 My Nana works at people's houses.
 My Papa works in Lebanon.

REDFORD NUNLEY, GRADE 5

My Family Lines

I have an average-sized family
My mom is a barber
My dad is a content creator
I have a sister named Ella
And a baby brother named Asher
My dad's name is Adam
My mom's name is Heather
I go to Greendale Elementary School
We have 2 dogs named Capone and Moose
And lastly, our last name is Salyer

HARPER SALYER, GRADE 5

The Bedtime Song

Ever since I was a kid, my family would sing me a bedtime song. It was made by my great-great-grandma and it was passed down for generations. Every night before I go to bed, my mom sings me a bedtime song. It is a sweet song that my whole family sings.

The song is about how much parents love their kids. Whenever a parent has a kid, they start singing this song to them every night. My mom would sing it like this: "When the sun goes down and the moon goes up, I walk into your room and you're sleeping softly in the night. You're so cute and I love you, my baby."

The song is pretty short, but it brings back many memories. The song reminds me how much my parents love me. Sometimes at school, I sing it in my head while I do my work. And that is the bedtime song that I shared with you today.

SOPHIA SHEARROW, GRADE 5

My Amazing Family

My mom makes amazing food for my father and me.
My father works Monday through Friday.

My parents are so nice, even when I'm upset.
My parents are the most important people in my life.
My parents throw me the best parties.
My mom is an at home mom.
My mother is an amazing crafter mom.
My parents always take me to karate.
My father works at Window World.
My parents take me to Dollywood, it is so fun.

DASSY WISE, GRADE 5

Holston View Elementary School

Dreams of the future are a common part of growing up. Some people dream of having a particular job or experiencing a world with peace and happiness for all. Dreams change throughout the passing of time, but are nonetheless important to our well-being and motivation. The children's musical Dreamcatcher by John Jacobson and Mark Brymer focuses on the importance of the dreams of children.

"What make you of the dreams of children?

Are they little or are they grand?

Can you see them on their faces?

Can you hold them in your hand?

Do they flit around like fairies

Or wrens before they sing?

Are they powerful or fragile?

Do they understand a thing

About what lies before them:

What life might have in store?

Are they destined to be realized?

If not, what are they for?

What make you of the dreams of children?

Look now. There they are!"

Brymer, Mark and John Jacobson. Dreamcatcher. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard and Brymark Publishing, 2005.

VALERIE PICKARD GRADE 5 MUSIC TEACHER

My Creative Dream

I dream of being a Film Maker because I want to entertain people with my movie ideas. All kinds of different ones from Disney to Marvel,space, to animals and even Action ones. I want families to sit down together to watch my creations and enjoy them. I would make a movie about me and my life. I want people to know how I lived my life, and maybe people will take something from it and use it in their life. I want people to love my movies so much that they are their favorite movie ever. How? You might ask I will go to UT and go to filming school then I will graduate and then go to a filming place and become a film maker. That is my wonderful dream.

HARPER BELL, GRADE 5

My Family Dream

I want to be a stay home mother or wife. I will help my kids with their homework and I need help with chores sometimes, so I can really use a hand. I will love them No matter what. I will cook and make dinner for my family. Finally I will love my husband too.

HEIDI BEREZNY, GRADE 5

My Dream

I would like to be a National Football League player. I dream of this because I feel like football is my talent. And it would also be a fun thing to do. It is also a quick way to make money. I also practice football every chance I get. I plan to succeed my dream by making it into the University of Tennessee and getting drafted into the Philadelphia Eagles.

MASON BARB, GRADE 5



Music students very focused while writing about their dreams

Football Dreams

My dream for the future is to become a professional football player. The reason I want to become a NFL football player is because football is my favorite sport. I love being part of a team,I plan to accomplish this goal by practicing hard every day. The reason I want to accomplish this goal is because Football allows me to be a leader while staying active and doing what I love.it is important to accomplish because ive always wanted this to happen. It is a sport that brings everyone together. It also teaches teamwork and discipline. As well as teaching good sportsmanship.I want to get stronger and faster so I can play in the NFL one day. It will take a lot of practice and hard work but this would be a dream come true.

HUNTER BREWER, GRADE 5

My Chef Dream

My dream is to be a viral chef youtuber. Because when I make the food I will give it to the homeless. It's important because the homeless needs food and I want to help them. And the reason I want to do that is that I feel bad and want to help them. And those are the reasons why I want to be viral chef.

DALTON CAUDLE, GRADE 5

Pizza For Everyone

My dream is to be a pizza delivery driver because I want to deliver pizzas and give them to people and make them happy so I can get money and then I get a house.

JAK FLETCHER, GRADE 5

Defending Justice

When I grow up I want to be a lawyer because I am passionate about justice and helping people in my community. I enjoy solving problems and using my words to stand up for others who might not be able to speak for themselves. To reach this goal, I know I will need to work hard in school, develop strong critical thinking skills, and learn how to analyze complex information. Lawyers do many interesting things, like researching cases, arguing in court, and helping people reach fair agreements. I am a good listener and I love to read, which are important skills for any attorney. By becoming a lawyer, I can make a real difference by fighting for what is right and ensuring that everyone is treated fairly under the law.

AUBREY GRIFFITTS, GRADE 5

My Animal Shelter Dream

I dream of owning a big animal shelter and helping animals find good homes. I dream of this because I see animals on the road that should have a home. And sometimes animals are not treated well and every animal should be treated with respect. How this can help the animals is to make animals get treated well with love and kindness. And every animal on the road will be well fed and watered with a warm place to stay in my animal shelter. I will accomplish this by working hard to make enough money to buy a big building and turn it into an animal shelter.

SHILOH GUINN, GRADE 5

My Soccer Dream

My dream is to be a professional soccer player. I dream to do this because I love soccer and I have done soccer since I was 4. Soccer has also been the one sport I have always wanted to do. I also love playing soccer with all my friends. I probably want to play for King College when I am older. I want to inspire other kids to try soccer or another sport. Also it could inspire other kids to follow their dreams. I plan to try and play every chance I get to. If I keep trying I maybe can get better to join a Professional team. This is why I want to be a professional soccer player because I have always loved it.

GRAYSEN HALL, GRADE 5

Game Dream

I dream of being a professional coder who makes games. The reason for this is because I want people enjoying my work. I see myself at Tennessee high coding like a pro.

KORBIN HUMPHREYS, GRADE 5

My Dental Hygiene Dream

My dream is to be a dental hygienist. I dream of this because I want everyone to have clean and healthy teeth. I also want to help as much as I can for people to be comfortable. The purpose of my dream is for people of all ages to not be sad when their teeth hurt or when they have cavities, because I will help them. I also want to work in a dentist office because I also want to work with the doctor and talk to the people who I am helping. I would like to go to The University of Tennessee and I will also go to a hygienist school.

JEWEL JACKSON, GRADE 5

My Dream

I have a dream that people would stop fighting. I dream this because nothing good comes from fighting. Another reason I dream this is because there is so much fighting in the world. My dream serves the purpose of helping people and encourages people to be kind. I hope to accomplish this goal by encouraging people to stop fighting.

BEN LINDERMAN, GRADE 5

Help For The Homeless

What's my dream? Well that's a hard question, because I don't dream of fame, wealth, or fortune. My dream is different, my dream is helping people as much as I can to make an impact in this world. Why? Because I believe everyone is equal and deserves second chances in this challenging world. My dream is important to me because everyday something impacts someone's life greatly. Whether it's getting turned down from a job, getting sick, or losing someone special. Because we really don't know how we can impact or change someone's

life by just being there. I plan to achieve this goal by opening a homeless shelter when I grow up, or helping someone reach their goal. That's my dream.

KRUZ MAYE, GRADE 5



Group working on their submissions for The Origin Project

My Lawyer Dream

When I grow up I want to be a lawyer. I want to be a lawyer when I grow up cause lots of people every day gets wrongly sentenced to wrong time in jail or prison. Its important cause some peoples lives get ruined cause they have to spend the rest of it in jail. So i want to this and give someone the right to live the rest of there life and not have to live the rest of it in jail or prison .I can accomplish this goal by giving a lot or as many people the right to live by giving then no time in jail or prison or give them the most least amount of time in jail or prison.

NICK MASSEY, GRADE 5

I Dream To Go D1

I dream to go D1 for baseball and hopefully get a scholarship to go to Major League Baseball. I dream of this because I've played baseball my whole life and it is a super fun Sport and I enjoyed it a lot. This serves a huge purpose in my life because my dad went D1 for baseball at Kentucky and I want to play baseball at Clemson University in South Carolina. This is my dream when I grow up.

BAINE MCINNIS, GRADE 5

Medical Dreams

My dream is to be a doctor because I like helping people and being a doctor can get you a lot of money for your life.but the way i will get there is i will go to medical school and learn how to become a doctor in college and then I will try to work at a hospital. When I'm a doctor I will probably not see my parents or probably my wife and kids when I'm older. So if being a doctor doesn't work I will probably be an archaeologist. That's because I'm pretty good at math and I like designing things. The reason why I'd be a doctor or archaeologist is because I heard being a doctor is fun and you can take care of people when they are sick or not feeling good. That's what I do for my siblings when they're not feeling well. The reason why I want to be an archeologist is because my mom said that if you're good at math then you can be an archeologist and I think I'm good at math so if I can't be a doctor then I will try and be an archeologist.

SAM ONTIVEROS, GRADE 5

My Medical Dream

My dream is to be a surgeon. I want to be a neuro surgeon. A neuro surgeon is where you mostly help in the brain section. I have been dreaming of this job since I was 4 years old. I really want to be a neuro surgeon because I really would like to help. I would help anywhere in the world. I hope I get into an amazing college. My dream college is going to Harvard or Stanford to get into an amazing medical school. I want to work in the operating room.

DIYAN PATEL, GRADE 5

My Athletic Dream

One day I dream to be a professional softball player at University of Tennessee. I dream to be this because I love to play softball. It lets all my nerves out and makes me calm. Softball is really fun. I get to spend time with a bunch of people I don't get to see a lot and they all feel like sisters when we play together and hang out. How I would like to accomplish this dream is I want to keep trying even if something gets hard and when I am ready I will try out for the team and hopefully make it. Letting people have fun watching people play softball is one thing that would help people. Another thing I would do is to inspire kids to keep trying and have fun with what you're doing. That is my dream and what I want to do with it.

LANDRY PROFFITT, GRADE 5

Olympic Dreams

I dream of one day being a women's and girls wrestling coach. I wrestle multiple times a week and I love wrestling. Some people expect me to be a lot worse than I really am at wrestling. I think that any female can wrestle just as good if not better than male wrestlers. I want to train girls to one day be Olympian wrestlers. Women's wrestling is becoming a bigger and bigger sport. I hope to get there by training all the time and doing lots of wrestling tournaments to one day become recognized as an all American Olympian wrestler and also a great female wrestling coach. I want more and more girls to wrestle. I am a two time state champion wrestler and I think wrestling is the hardest sport there possibly is. I want to show the world girls can wrestle as good as anyone else.

PIPER SMITH GRADE 5

Alabama Football Star

My dream is to be an Alabama football player. I will be the best Alabama player ever. I dream this because my grandpa got me in to Alabama and I can't stop loving Alabama ROLLTIDE! I dream to be center in football so I snap the ball and not break my legs. I will accomplish this by going to the University of Alabama. I've been in Alabama since I was 5 and 10 years old and I will never stop loving Alabama. I have played football before and I put NFL Flag Football for the Miami Dolphins but I want to go to Alabama because I love football so much. So now you know how much I love Alabama.

JAKE TERRY, GRADE 5

My Bio Engineer Dream

I have a dream to become a Bio Engineer dream this because I have fun doing experiments. Another reason I want to be a bio engineer is I enjoy discovering new things. Being a bio engineer will serve the purpose of knowledge. I will accomplish this dream by going to Massachusetts institute of technology. I am passionate in this dream and I will do whatever I can to accomplish this dream.

MASON TAYLOR, GRADE 5

An Imagineered Dream

I dream of being a Disney imagineer. An imagineer is someone who creates attractions for Disney parks around the world. It would be nice to know that my ride is helping strengthen family bonds. I would create rides that are from old movies without messing up classics. I would also create a new musical exclusive to Disney parks. I plan to achieve this by inventing ideas and building them both physically and mentally. In short I would help family bonds strengthen through my imagination.

BRECKIN WALLACE, GRADE 5

Scientific Discoveries

My dream is to be a scientist because we have learned so much about our world, but we have much much more to learn. I want to discover many important things like a vaccine for cancer or maybe discover a way to make hover tech. I will probably go to King College to major in science and possibly minor in physics.

WILL YEZEK, GRADE 5

John S. Battle High School

Bluegrass Should Be More Appreciated in Today's Society

There are many types of people in this world. With that, comes many different ways people express themselves. One of the biggest ways us humans express ourselves is through music. What started as something practiced among different cultures was quickly able to spread throughout the world through advancements in technology. One of these types of music is bluegrass music, an often (though not always) overlooked and scoffed at genre. I believe bluegrass music should be more appreciated in our current society because of its impact on other genres, use of true musical talent, and powerful messages.

Oftentimes, when someone who is not strongly familiar with bluegrass music hears a bluegrass song or even the name bluegrass or banjo or even guitar, they think of uncultured, unintelligent hillbillies: a stereotype. But in my opinion, it's a gentlemen's game. The term "Bluegrass" was never used until the late 40s and early 50s, but the music existed in other forms for decades before. Like other genres, modern day bluegrass has evolved from its forefathers. But what many people don't know is that many of the most popular modern genres in the U.S. today evolved from bluegrass, especially genres like country and rock and roll. Rock stars like Bob Dylan, Elvis Presley, Jerry Garcia, and country stars like Dierks Bentley, Dwight Yoakam, Vince Gill, and countless others have credited bluegrass legends like the Stanley Brothers and Bill Monroe for how they created their sound. This is why bluegrass has such a big impact on other genres of music.

One of the most important aspects of bluegrass music is the musician's talents. Unlike lots of other modern genres like rap, hip-hop, pop, electronic, and others, bluegrass features real, authentic, raw talent. Instead of the music being generated from a computer and blasted through stadium speakers, the musicians are working hard on stage playing complicated solos and singing tight harmonies. Also, a big portion of where bluegrass music is performed is at places like summer festivals, bar rooms, and other poor condition stages. As a bluegrass musician, I, myself, know how playing a festival stage in mid-July is not always an easy task. People like Billy Strings have reached a more mainstream fan base, often playing stadiums and sold-out arenas, but for many bluegrass artists, even the legends of the genre, this isn't always the case; even the greats don't always get those luxuries, but it's the artists' true talents that keep them going. This is why bluegrass features true musical talent.

I believe that what you listen eventually to comes out in yourself. Sacred singing of hymns and Jesus are regularly practiced in bluegrass and make up a large portion of its repertoire. Lots of genres (not all) that people listen to have songs that consist of extreme profanity and touch on vulgar, violent topics, a very rare occurrence in bluegrass. Another large portion of bluegrass songs touch on subjects like the love of our parents, home, and family. Bluegrass is a great choice for downhome, appropriate music.

I believe that bluegrass music should be more appreciated in today's society because of its impact on other genres, use of true musical talent, and powerful messages. I truly believe that it would benefit our world if we appreciated the value of bluegrass music more.

EASTON COMPTON, GRADE 10

Nana Angel

Shawn and Erin had been married eight years and felt that there was something missing in their lives. They talked about numerous things, but couldn't quite put a finger on it. Then one day in September when they were talking about their friends having babies, they realized that was what was missing in their lives.

After my parents found out that they were expecting a baby, they were ecstatic. They had already started building a new house, so this confirmed they would use one of the bedrooms as a nursery. Erin, my mom, started buying clothes, diapers, and all kinds of things for babies. She wanted to decorate the nursery in either

pink or blue, so she had several ultrasounds through the pregnancy to find out what gender I was. Once they found out in May of 2008 that I was a girl, they were able to decorate the nursery in pink.

My mom's parents and siblings didn't live in Bristol, but she was raised there. My father's parents and cousins lived in Bristol, but his sister and brother-in-law and their family lived in Florida. This meant I would be the only grandchild here that my Dad's parents would be able to see every day. My parents built their new house on the same farm my Papaw and Nana lived on, so they were going to be able to see me as much as they wanted too.

In the Summer of 2005, my Nana had a dry cough that never seemed to go away. She went to the doctor multiple times before she was diagnosed with lung cancer. She had several tests and two surgeries. She did pretty well, but struggled sometimes with breathing and being weak. She tried her hardest to fight through the side effects and strengthen her body and lungs the best she could. The oddest thing to me is that my Nana never smoked, and her parents never did either, and she developed a rare form of lung cancer.

Even though my grandparents were my mom's in-laws, my mom loved them just like they were her own parents. After Mom found out she was pregnant with me and having a girl, she bought my Nana a Willow Tree figure: "Grandmother" The figure resembles a grandmother holding a grandchild. My Nana collected the Willow Tree figures, so when mom found the "Grandmother" figure, she thought it would be a perfect gift for Nana. Nana could always look at it and think of me.

I was born on July 23, 2008, and many people came out to celebrate with my parents and see me for the first time. When my Nana came by the hospital, my mom gave her the Willow Tree figure as a gift from both of us. Mom told her that we would call the figurine "Nana" instead of "Grandmother" since my cousins had already chosen to call her Nana.

After my mom went back to work, my Papaw and Nana watched me every day. Mom would drop me off at their house and come back and pick me up when she got off work. My Nana loved to keep me because she wasn't able to babysit my cousins since they lived in Florida. She loved to hold me, sing to me, and rock me to sleep.

On September 28, 2008, my Nana took a turn for the worst. She had to go back to the hospital, but before she went, she wrote me a letter to thank me for the "Nana Angel" my mom and I got her when I was born. In the letter she said I would get the "Nana Angel" someday when I knew how much she loved me, and she would watch over me and try to protect me from the world and let me know the love from Jesus Christ.

My Nana grew her wings on October 15th, 2008. I was almost three months old. I don't remember her, but I know through the pictures and stories from everyone who knew her that she was an amazing person. On my 13th birthday, July 23, 2021, my Papaw gave me the letter and "Nana Angel" that my Nana left for me. I keep it in my room looking over my bed, and I know that my Nana watches over me all the time. The "Nana Angel" will forever hold a place in my heart for my Nana and the love she had for me.



Left to right: Caleb Mayo, Gavin Sheets, Amelia Knickerbocker, Victoria Turner, Kendall Salyer, and Lila Eades

LILA EADS, GRADE 12

Building the Beginning

I was born on May 21st, 2008 as the eldest child and daughter of my family. My mom ended up having to get an emergency c-section in order to have me safely, but thankfully we both ended up being perfectly fine. I remember that my dad once showed me a photo he took soon after I was born. It'd been a side-by-side comparison of my newborn foot and his thumb, which were about the same size back then. Nowadays that photo is quite ironic, seeing as I have since inherited his enormous feet, something that he apologizes for often.

My mother says that out of all three of her pregnancies, mine was the most difficult. Usually that's not uncommon for one's first successful pregnancy, but she made a point to emphasize just how many times she had to vomit before and during labor. "Throughout the entire c-section all I did was throw up in a bucket while they were busy cutting me open," is what she'd said once, after I'd asked what it was like for her the day I was born.

Before that, though, I was also apparently difficult in the fact that I didn't move around much, which understandably worried my parents on occasion. But when they'd consult the doctor, they'd be told that I was fine and apparently take out a rod-like thing that they'd place on top of my mom's stomach. The doctor would press a button and all of a sudden I'd go from lazing around to kicking up a storm so quickly that my dad was left wondering with slight worry what the heck they were doing to the baby.

Later on in life, when my dad was telling me this exact story, he felt the need to add a comment about how I was "slow as molasses even back then." I'd probably have protested the notion if I didn't have enough self-awareness to know that he had a point. I'm always the last one to get ready in the mornings, after all. I suppose some things never really change about a person, even before they have a chance to do so.

With that being said, there were still plenty of things about me and my life that did change as I got older. Like my picky eating habits or my love for horror. One of the biggest examples of a major change was the day that I was told I needed glasses by the optometrist, of whom my five-year-old mind knew strictly as the "weird doctor man that wouldn't stop looking at my face." For what felt like forever I was subjected to having bright lights shone in my eyes, told to read the numbers on different charts out loud through a machine that changed lenses, and had some kind of air puff blown in my eye. That last part was especially unpleasant for a little kid, and I vaguely remember crying a little to my mom, not because it hurt, but because it scared me quite a bit since I wasn't really expecting it.

As for the reason I needed glasses, well, back then I didn't really care enough to ask. All I knew at the time was that it had something to do with me habitually crossing my eyes and that I wanted my first pair of said glasses to be pink. When I got older, though, I realized that one of my eyes didn't see quite as well as the other. While I'm not completely helpless without my glasses, and go without them for a period of time if they break, it's much easier to see things from long distances and read more than a few pages of a book when I have them on. Sometime before I got glasses, a different, even more life-altering change had happened in my life: I became a big sister.

At the age of five I didn't really understand the gravity of having younger siblings or just how frustrating they could be once they learned how to speak. I just thought it'd be like having a friend that I got to see nearly every hour of every day instead of just at school or during birthday parties. Perhaps if my siblings and I had been closer in age that would've been the case, but the decent gap in our ages made it especially difficult for us to get along as we got older. I even found myself feeling relieved on multiple occasions that I would only ever have to go to the same school as them once during elementary and then I'd be off on my own all the way until high school graduation. I still love them to death, obviously, just not enough to want to see their faces in the school hallways or, God forbid, share a class with one of them. But of course, I didn't know any of this at the time and so the prospect was so exciting to me that I even went as far as to pray for it.

There used to be three little blueberry bushes that were planted in a line directly behind the old playground set that I absolutely adored as a kid. So one day, I decided to head out into my yard, kneel before the blueberry bushes, and ask God to “please give me a little sister,” as if simply asking would guarantee that it became a reality. My younger sister was born nine months later. I then proceeded to do the same thing with my little brother--specifying the gender just as I did before--and when I excitedly told my mom all about it she looked down at me and told me not to do it again, please, as if she and my dad hadn't been wanting more kids this whole time as well.

AMELIA KNICKERBOCKER, GRADE 12

Finally on the Path

My schooling was most likely different from other kids, as I moved schools halfway through elementary, and, compared to other kids, I also loved to read. I loved to read so much, in fact, that I had trouble focusing on anything else. I used to read like nobody's business; back in elementary we had to read a specified amount of words and take a test on the book we read, to gain points for something called AR reading. In 4th grade, I reached four million words and got my own trophy--I even got an iPod touch because of my reading.

However, in middle school, my life went a bit downhill. I started to care more about what others thought of me than how I felt, and as most know, middle school is known as the peak time where bullying starts. I got bullied through half of my 6th grade year, and suddenly... Boom...I'm at my Nana's for what was supposed to be two weeks but ended up being a whole year. Unfortunately, my grades fell behind because of it.

But then, finally, during my 8th grade year, I joined the Marching Band.

I will say that I enjoy Band very much--all of my current friends are people I met through band, and without that, I don't think I would be the same person I am today. From then to now, I have done nothing but grow, and now, I am a Senior, finally about to graduate, and I feel like I am finally on the path to accomplishing what I want to do in life!

CALEB MAYO, GRADE 12

Soulmate in the Bluey Backpack

When I think about my friends, one particular person comes to mind. We met our freshman year of high school, and to say we were friends from the very beginning would be the biggest lie ever.

We definitely did not start out as friends; honestly, I could not stand her. My boyfriend at the time was her escort in our school pageant and that honestly just made me dislike her even more. However, thanks to our environmental science teacher, Ms. Harrison, partnering us together for a project, we started getting closer. To this day, I think she knew what she was doing with those groups.

Fast forward to summer, when my boyfriend and I broke up and I was absolutely heart-broken. She was at the beach with one of her other friends, but did not hesitate to check on me every second of the day until she came home. When she got back from the beach, she planned the sweetest girls' night to get me out of the house and distract me from reality. It was all pink-themed, plus we went to the dam and watched the sunset. We swam in the pool and had the best time ever. After that night, we were pretty much inseparable and were together just about every single day.

During our sophomore year through junior year, she was in a relationship with a boy, and I honestly thought it wouldn't have turned out like it did. He almost tore us apart, but I made sure she knew that I was always there for her no matter what. I never let him push me too far away from her. Even though I hardly got to see her, I still loved her with my whole heart. It was very hard not getting to really be a part of all her big milestones, but I was always her biggest sideline cheerleader. Even though it caused a rough patch between us, I never let her forget that I loved her, that I was always going to be there whenever she needed me. We didn't

completely “go ghost” from each other, but things were nowhere near what they were before they got together. I know God put us in each other’s lives for a reason, and that God was not going to let it end over a boy.

Now it’s our senior year of high school; they broke up and just like how she was there for me when I got my heart broken, I made sure I was there for her, to wipe her tears, make her smile, and get her out of the house the same way she did with me just three short years ago. I have gotten her out of the house anytime I know she needs it--taken her on so many food dates, so many “car rotting” in the Walmart parking lot dates, and so many adventures to get her mind off things.

We have matching Bluey bookbags as our senior bag since Bluey is our little inside joke. We have classes together this year (I think our teachers wish we didn’t), we go absolutely everywhere together, and we never go more than two days without each other unless it’s out of our control. We are back to being inseparable; I have separation anxiety from her. She is genuinely my best friend.

Now for a message to her: when the day comes and life takes us our separate ways, I promise that nothing will ever stop me from being your best friend. Even when we are states away from each other, I will always be one phone call away, and be home as soon as I can. Senior year isn’t over yet; let’s live it to the fullest, go to every concert we can, go on trips, and live life to the fullest. I love you to the ends of the earth, V.

KENDALL SALYER, GRADE 12

Lessons and Mountains...

When I was too young to understand time, I took it for granted. When my parents were busy, I would get sent to my grandparents, so I ended up very close with them. As my mother became her own boss, working from home, I saw them less and less, though I did still see them; it wasn’t nearly as often as I used to.

When I was in my sophomore year, my Pap (what I called my Grandfather), like he often did at the time, had to take me home from school. On the way, we picked up food for my siblings and me. When we went to pick it up, he offered to go in and eat our meals together. I naively declined and said I was tired from the day and would eat at home. A few days later, he peacefully passed away in his sleep. I was so angry at myself that I didn’t eat with him.

I didn’t see the lesson within: take every opportunity as if it is the last time you can. I have tried to live by this ever since and take every opportunity I can.

Soon after I had to learn that lesson with my grandfather’s passing, I got into hiking and camping. Something about the disconnect from society reset my brain and could let me take a step back from everything to see that it was alright.

Now one of my favorite hobbies is hiking and backpacking, exploring the mountains for days at a time. The beauty that is held in the mountains is absolutely stunning; no matter where you are in the mountains, there’s always a view to take in. Seeing the area go through changes as the year goes by is possibly my favorite part; seeing a view in fall is completely different than seeing the same view in summer.

The most difficult hike I’ve done is the Linville Gorge gap loop; it is also the only hike I’ve never fully finished. It is 25 miles of pure uphill, with 5,500 feet of elevation gain. I went with two friends, one a good friend I’ve known for years, and the other I’ve met only one time before, so the conversation was endless. The first day, we did 10 miles before making it to the perfect spot and camped for the night, but the next day, the hike was brutal from the sheer elevation. When we made it to the beautiful view, we sat for a while and determined whether we wanted to continue or go back. We decided the rest of the hike would be okay, except for the very end, which was almost vertical climbing for 1000 feet, so we turned around and headed back the way we came.

The mountains have always been there to explore when I need them, and to give me difficulty to better myself. Concerning the Linville trip: I plan to go back and overcome it one day. When I was young, I would

see the mountains in the distance and wonder why they were there or what they did, and now I get to go up and admire the view, thinking about all those years ago.

GAVIN SHEETS, GRADE 12

Best Friend in the Bluey Backpack

My best friend and I met during our freshmen year and definitely did not love each other. She especially didn't like me when her boyfriend at the time was my escort at the pageant. We had environmental science together and over time we became really close.

She had her first heart break at the end of freshman year during the summer. I was at the beach with one of my girlfriends at the time, but when I came home we planned the best girls' night. We made it pink-themed, watched the sunset at the dam, made pink cupcakes, went swimming, and more. We had the best night.

Then we started sophomore year and did everything together. We got ready for games together, left school together, and everything above. And then she got her license, and you know we were never not running the road!

During junior year, we continued to do things together and then we took a step back due to the relationship I was in. If I could go back, I would have never let that happen, but we all make mistakes. Moving forward, I will never let that happen again.

Senior year has now begun. We have matching Bluey backpacks and we are now doing clinicals together. The only thing I wish is that I could cheer my senior year with her by my side, but she is at every game possible. She was there for me during the worst breakup of my life, and she has helped me build myself back since then.

We will make the best of this year together. I am beyond thankful to be able to call her my best friend, my human, my ride or die. I appreciate her more than she will ever know. So, to my best friend, thank you for everything, and I love you.

VICTORIA TURNER, GRADE 12

Lee High School

Failure

Failure.

Failure is something that most fear and try to avoid. Others see failure as the building blocks to success. I have experienced failure numerous times in my life, but none more significant than those of the past two years.

I'm a golfer. I played for my high school's golf team, and our ultimate goal every year was to win the State Championship in mid-October. In my freshman year, we made it into the State Championship and finished 5th; none of my teammates, including myself, saw this as a failure. We saw it as a learning experience, as this was the first time any of us had been on a stage like that. Moving forward to my sophomore year, we were all level-headed, learned from our previous experience, and ended up winning the State Championship.

Winning the state title set a new expectation, though, and my teammates and I were determined to win it again the following year.

I am sure whoever is reading this is probably asking: Where is the failure in this? I promise it's coming!

Now, moving into my junior year, leading up to the State Championship, our team had compiled a 110-0 record throughout the year. This year brought challenges and high expectations for our team. For myself, I had to undergo two major arm surgeries and had a long road to recovery going into my junior year, so I felt like I had more to play for. My five other teammates thought we were going to come out victorious in the big tournament again. We were wrong; not only did we not win, but we finished 3rd, and the 2nd place team was a team we had defeated seven times during the regular season.

We were devastated, and for one of the only times in my life, I felt like I had failed. Not only had I failed myself, but also the team and everyone cheering us on back home. I went silent for several days, trying to piece together what went wrong. The loss changed my thought process on everything... Am I good enough to play this game? What do I need to do to keep this from happening again?

Over the winter and into the spring, the loss lit a fire inside of me to practice harder than ever before to make sure my senior year would not end in defeat. I had a couple of setbacks during this climb to the mountaintop; once again, I had knee surgery in the spring and a back injury at the beginning of my senior season. Once again, our team went all the way through the regular season, only losing twice. We won another District and Region Championship. Our team was on its way back to the championship game.

We were dead set that we were going to win; it was our last time playing together in the State Championship, with four seniors on the team, including me. This was it; we were prepared, but once again we had failed. Our team left without placing first, but this time, I felt different about our loss. We all learned that day that it wasn't so much about winning; it was about playing together as a team one last time. We had been through so much together, and at that moment, it was all over, and we would be moving on to new things. Our perception had changed. We saw it as a time to be grateful for the four years we spent together.

Now that a couple of months have gone by, I have learned that failure is necessary; if you haven't failed once, if not numerous times, you haven't tried hard enough at whatever you're doing. Even if you don't end up on the mountaintop at the end, you cannot give up. You keep going, even after a fall. That is success: never giving up, no matter the cost.

BRYCEN COOMER, GRADE 12

Everyday Calls

★First Place, Nancy Bolmeier Fisher Scholarship Recipient★

Every afternoon, right around the same time each day, my phone would ring.

I didn't even have to look at the screen to know who it was.

"Hey, Aubrey Lynn," Papa would say, his voice warm and steady, like it had all the time in the world just for me.

Papaw was the kind of person who never missed a day. No matter how busy he was, no matter what was going on, he called. Sometimes we talked about big things like my future school, life, worries I didn't want to tell anyone else. Sometimes we talked about nothing at all.

But somehow, even those small conversations felt important.

He had been in the fire department for years. When he told stories about those days, his eyes would light up. He didn't talk about being brave, but everyone knew he was. He ran toward the fires when others ran away. He helped people on their worst days. But to me, the bravest thing he ever did was show up every single day with love.

When I was younger, I thought firefighters were heroes because of the sirens and the flashing lights. As I got older, I realized real heroes are the ones who answer the phone every time you need them. The ones who listen without judging. The ones who say, "I love you," and mean it like it's the most natural thing in the world.

Last July, the calls stopped.

At first, the silence felt too big. I'd still catch myself thinking, I should tell Papaw about this. I'd reach for my phone before remembering. Grief is strange like that—it sneaks up on you in ordinary moments.

But then I started noticing something else.

When I'm unsure about a decision, I hear his steady voice in my mind.

When I feel alone, I remember that for years, someone chose to call me every single day just to make sure I was okay.

And sometimes, when the afternoon gets quiet, I swear I can almost hear the echo of the phone ringing.

Papaw may not be here to dial my number anymore, but his love still shows up daily. It's in the lessons he taught me. It's in the way I try to listen better, care deeper, and tell the people in my life that I love them every day.

He was a firefighter, yes. But more than that, he was my safe place. And that kind of hero never really leaves.

AUBREY MALLE, GRADE 12

Dwight

Dwight is a character that I have had for a couple of years at this point. He has gone through many changes throughout the years in terms of his design, as he started off very plain with short black hair and no personal



Digital art by Avree McQueen

style of clothes. Instead, I wanted him to be unique. His character and clothes are inspired by the punk sub-culture; worn and ragged, he doesn't care for societal expectations for his appearance or behavior.

Punk was a good inspiration, as it could be very aggressive and eye-catching, or you could display it in more ordinary ways. I leaned more towards a mild design for this piece, as I wasn't focused on the design as much as I was on the color and contrast. With this piece of my character, Dwight, I really wanted to focus on color and contrast. I wanted to have dramatic lighting and a moody tone. I used very cool tones to set the theme, making sure to keep the background just a little darker to prevent the character from blending in.

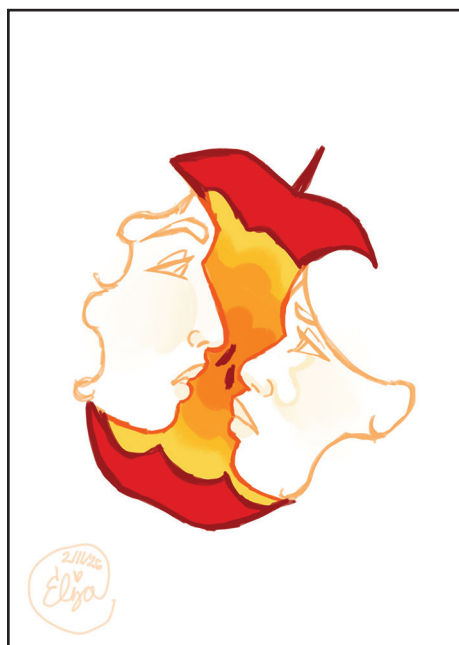
I really wanted a focal point, and for that point to contrast greatly with the rest of the work, and that's where the light from the cigarette comes in. By keeping the values of the face and cigarette light, I was able to maintain attention on the character's face while also drawing it down to the character.

AVREE MCQUEEN, GRADE 12

Venus and Hanna

The reason I chose to draw these two between an apple is that I think it's a great metaphor for their friendship. They want to be close to each other, but they aren't getting to the core of their issues. Their expressions are different too, with Venus (the one on the left) looking surprised and Hanna (the one on the right) looking frustrated. She can so clearly see the issue, but Venus feigns ignorance because that's easier than changing.

ELIZA BOOTH, GRADE II



Digital art by Eliza Booth

Why Is Art Important?

There have been countless times that I have stared at a painting in wonder, or at a sculpture in awe. I can not help but think: How did they do that? To enjoy art is to enjoy creative expression and human connection. It's more than a few strokes on a canvas or a well-written sentence; it is its own language that has meaning, symbolism, and freedom.

I find art fascinating, especially art history. Starting with cave paintings and oral storytelling, humans have almost al-

ways incorporated art into their lives. From pre-history to the present, art in all forms can be seen around the world. The ancient Greeks took pride in their works and valued expression. Chinese culture used art, also called guohua, to embody tradition and religion. Many Native American nations used rhythmic music and dance to foster community and establish a connection with the Earth. What do these groups all have in common? They all use art like a tool to honor culture and emphasize their beliefs.

Art has had its ups and downs throughout history. Artwork took on significant meaning, especially during the Second World War. During the war, roughly 20% of Europe's art was destroyed or looted. Like the "Portrait of a Young Man", which was painted by Raphael, previously housed in a museum in Poland until it was stolen and eventually lost. Each work destroyed represented the hopes and dreams of the artists who created it. They are parts of history we may never fully return.

Although there were periods of struggle, nothing can destroy a human's artistic creativity. New art forms emerged to explain the trauma of the post-war world. This includes abstractism and subjectivity. This is why I imagine art to be a phoenix, since every time it is suppressed, it comes back stronger than before.

ELLA SHELL, GRADE 10

Excerpt from *The Elephant Hanging Bridge*

Warning: Animal Abuse

"When you are traveling in East Tennessee and Southwest Virginia, you most likely will pass through Erwin, Tennessee. It's a beautiful area, all rolling hills and oceans of trees. There are several old railroad bridges in the area, although now they are scarcely used. One of the bridges you pass, however, has a bit of a story to it. It is commonly called "the elephant hanging bridge" for quite self-explanatory reasons. It was used to hang an elephant in the 1910s. The story had been quite sensationalized over the years, but it still persists."

MALLORY WATSON, GRADE 10

Where I Am From

Built on agriculture and coal mines
Farming tobacco and logging pines
Where the Wilderness Trail was blazed
And many Future Farmers are raised
This is where I am from
And I'm sure you'd love to come
Where skies, blue and clear
Have fields, full of deer
Just look at the scenery
And see all the greenery
Pines and oaks standing tall
Dogwoods beneath them all
On its limb, a cardinal nest
Where a mother and her eggs rest
The old mountains blanketed in green
Rolling on for miles to be seen
Listen early for a mourning dove's cry
Hear the Powell River rushing by
Look close to see a copperhead coiled and still
And watch a lake's waters to see the bluegill
Eastern box turtles soaking in sunlight
Fireflies twinkling on a summer night
This is where I am from
And I'm sure you'd love to come
Where old folk stories are still being told
And we love national blue and corn gold

LEEANN ARP, GRADE 9

HEROBRINE

(Minecraft Poem)

Block by block, the worlds you roam
A pixel land of dirt and stone

Once all gone, you turn away
Yet in this world of blocks I stay

You now reside in your true home
While living there, you're not alone

Your mom, your dad, they love you so
You tell the truth, show them your phone

"Haunted by a game, you say?"
They shake their heads and turn away

You won't forget what you have done
The worlds were split, but now they're one

Deep in the mines,
As dark as night

You dug straight down
With all your might

The bedrock box
As sunlight shone

Opened up
Whilst creaked and groaned

The portal you then lit, no fear
Not knowing yet, the end is near

This world now tied up with your own
From pixel blocks to flesh and bone

A million other lives you had
Thought to yourself, "It's not so bad."

worlds combined, what have you done?
A million lives now only one

No respawn hangs within your sight
My lifeless eyes give you a fright

You must survive on half a heart
Don't let your dearest world go dark

You swing and heave your diamond sword
It's just a game and nothing more

Your muscles ache, arms getting sore
You mustn't stop, don't lose this war

"You'll never win, cause I won't quit."
You mock me, and I'm sick of it

A lightning shock that sends you back
And yet you get up and attack

"You've nothing left, just give up now."
I tell you as I stare you down

Yet you persist with a flaming soul
Not giving up till the final toll
Other's lives depend on you
Your heart is gold, so pure and true

My eyes no longer shine or glow
The light is dim, one final blow

"Just end it now, I can't go on
Blow out the lights and move along."

Your sword held high, I'm close to death
I pause to heave my final breath

I hear a clang, sword crashes down
Instead of me, it hit the ground

You spared my life, I'm in your debt
This battle I won't soon forget

You help me up without a word
Yet mercy was all that I heard

Armies filled with mobs and beasts
Back to the world of block retreats

Down in the mines, beyond the stone
Flee we did to our biomes

From flesh and bone to pixel cubes
I place a block and light the fuse

Inside this world the players roam
To mine and craft and build a home

And there I wait till others dare
To step a foot into my lair

These stars up high, they glow so bright
They float and shine all through the night

The time goes on and days go past
10 minutes each is all they last

The days fly by in just a snap
So short and quick, much like a nap

From overworld unto the end,
through all of these, I find no friend

But alas, I still do roam
Don't settle down nor build a home

I scare you with my light-filled eyes
And set you up for your demise

You call me mean, turn off the game
This loneliness will never change

Till free once more, this world I stay
The Minecraft game you love to play.

ZEKE BARNETTE, GRADE 9

Nerves

Have you ever felt so nervous that you became nauseous? The night before my surgery was like that. The surgery was for my eyes to realign my eye muscles. I was diagnosed with strabismus, which is caused by a problem in the eye muscles and nerves. The doctor said the only way to fix my eyes was with laser surgery.

To help with my nerves, I went to my grandparents' house. I can distinctly remember lying down on their red living room couch, shoveling popcorn and any other unhealthy snack I could get my hands on. I knew that the doctor had ordered an empty stomach before surgery, so I couldn't eat before my operation. I felt the need to binge eat before the big day.

That day, after two and a half hours of anxiety, we pulled into the Niswonger Children's Hospital parking lot. I was miserable during the drive over; my stomach hurt and kept growling like an animal the whole time. Fortunately, my turmoil melted away as my Grandmother, Mom, and I entered the lobby. There were brightly colored stained-glass windows, and the foyer had a more peaceful aura than any other hospital or clinic I have been to. I can recall sitting on a cube-shaped sofa, Raya and the Last Dragon playing on a TV. My grandma and I made jokes about the film to lighten my mood and distract me.

The hospital bed was extremely toasty, and a large plastic tube under the sheets was spraying my body with hot air. Even with the tube, a nurse walked in with a large collection of blankets for me to keep. Though a small gesture, it soothed my dread before the surgery could start. After that, an IV was put in my forearm. That was the anesthesia. It caused me to become sleepy, unaware, and a bit hysterical. I remember singing to family members, then laughing at my own voice before being rolled away.

Under anesthesia, the surgeon, with a laser, would cut a tiny section in my clear eye membrane, behind my eyelids (yikes), to reach the actual muscles. To strengthen or weaken the muscle, the surgery was supposed to "reboot" the nerves sending messages to my eyes. Obviously, I was not awake for this, but I do know the strabismus surgery took around two hours. "For the whole thing, all she talked about was getting food," said the nurse as I lay in the same bed I started in. My eyes stung, like tiny little fire ants were under them. I was crying profusely.

The ride home was a vague blur and tears and sleep, a relieved blur at least. For all my worries about food, I didn't eat much of anything afterwards. After the stress, nausea, and the odd feeling of being under the anesthetic, the quiet ride was appreciated. I was truly grateful for the medical staff who took such good care of me; also, having my mother and my grandmother with me soothed my nerves. The blanket I received from the nurses I keep on my bed at all times, it's like a treasure to me.

It took two weeks to fully heal my eyes, but I was given a full check-up, and the doctor said everything went perfectly. I have a new perspective on the medical profession now, and I know I would be as nervous as my next doctor's visit.

SAXON SKIDMORE, GRADE 9

Morrison School

Broken to Blessed

This past year was the most difficult of my life, but also the best year of my life. After living a married life with children and grandchildren, it all changed. The man I was married to decided to live a different life, therefore; my life was changed dramatically. I was devastated. All that I knew was gone. I had lived this life since the age of seventeen. I had raised my children in this life. I spent time with my grandchildren in this life and had just been blessed with my fifth grandchild. I had thought life was good. I thought I was happy. Now, I realize I was just settled. My life was comfortable, my life was a routine, my life was constant.

After a world of chaos, loneliness and sadness, God changed things around for me. He brought a man into my life who brought things I had only ever wished for. He brought deep happiness, laughter that I hadn't had in years, protectiveness that I had never felt and he brought love back into my heart. We were married and now live a life I've only ever dreamed of. I realize now that God saw I needed true love, a protector, a best friend and someone to help me live a truly deep-rooted happy life. He blessed me with all of that and more. Kevin Estes helped heal me from the sadness I felt and has helped me realize that life is meant to be enjoyed, not endured.

God filled the hole in my heart like only He could and helped me to forgive so I could grow. Kevin and I attend church together, read and pray together, laugh together and have fun together. I truly feel like a child again when I'm with him. He makes me want to be better, to try different things, to view life as a blessing as well as an adventure. He is sincerely the love of my life. I am thankful forever. Change is hard, but oftentimes, change is needed. God knows what we need even before we do.

I'm sharing my story to encourage others not to give up. When things happen in your life that upset your plans, hang on. Look up. Be thankful for the people in your life, the things God has given you and always give your best. Be kind to others, be positive and give your all to God. He wants the best for you and if you trust Him, He will always guide you and bless you.

CRYSTAL ESTES, TEACHER

My Sister

My sister is one of the greatest people I know! I love her so much. She is such a strong and beautiful person. She also tries hard at what she loves. She works two jobs which she worked hard to get. My sister is only seventeen years old. It's crazy to me that she's so successful for her age. She plans to go to college to get into cosmetology and I am so proud of her!

She may have been hostile to me when I was younger and also some of the time now, but I still love her very much. I am very proud of what she's doing. My sister has been through a tough childhood and life in general has been hard for her. She (and I) lost our birth dad when she was only seven years old. That was hard on her but also our family. She has stayed strong after that though and daily tries her best.

My sister works at our church and is a supervisor for the kids at the end of the day. She might even become an assistant teacher; however, she is not eighteen yet, so it will have to wait. She has a part-time job at a smoothie place which is cool. She seems to love her job, and I am so happy for her. Although she has been through a tough time, she stayed strong and began to pursue a great future. I am very lucky to have such a cool sister. Not only is my sister very strong, confident, and successful, but she is also very pretty. She takes a lot of photos. I just recently went to the park with her to take her graduation photos, which she looked great in.

She is very photogenic when it comes to taking pictures and she looks great every time. She has very loyal friends and spends a lot of time outside the house instead of in her room. She is almost never home now. She does have her own car and it is a beautiful car, it's like a silver color and has some cute stickers. I really like

her car! She always tries to help out and do the best she can. She really is amazing and even buys gifts for us sometimes. My sister is helpful, kind, pretty, and way more. I love my sister!

ALEXIS BENTLEY, GRADE 8

My Dad

My dad's name was Steven. He was in the army. He passed away when I was much younger. I was little and I can't really remember what he looked like, but I have a lot of pictures of him. I found some of his stuff like some knives and more pictures and a lot more. I do have his truck, and it is my favorite color, which is blue.

In the army, the vehicle he drove had a missile on the back and he was the one who would set them off. I enjoy hearing stories about him and having some of his things. Now and then, I do go to his grave to put some new flowers on his grave. I'll always love him.

ALEX CHAPMAN, GRADE 8

My Papaw

This is about my Papaw, Leon. My papaw loved me since the day he met me and my brother, Joseph. My papaw was a man of God. He always loved to sing gospel music at his church. He was a children's teacher at his church and loved teaching kids about God. My papaw often helped all his family in their ups and downs. When I was a little baby, he sang me gospel songs. When he died, my family was very upset, even me. My papaw meant the world to me. That is my story about my papaw.

AUDREY GAMBILL, GRADE 7

My Parents

I love my dad. I love working with him, he is very supportive of me. He preaches at my church and does such a good job teaching the word of God. He helps me when I need him and even when someone else needs him, he is there. My dad helps me practice a sport any time I am playing one. I am glad to have a dad like him. He means a lot in my life. He inspires me to work (when I get older), and to be my best. My dad is kind. He would go out and help people that need it. You're the best dad in the world and I just want to say, "I love you Dad."

My mom is amazing, too! She cooks, cleans and does a lot of things around the house. If it wasn't for her, our house would be a crazy mess. I am so blessed to have a mother like her. I am so thankful for my mom. My mom is a very good Christian woman. If it wasn't for my mother, I wouldn't be what I am today. My mom is the best mom I could ever wish for. She does a lot for me and our family. My mom is very supportive of me and my sister. I just want to say, "I love you Mom."

JOSEPH GAMBILL, GRADE 7

Dance

Dance touched my life. I was five years old when I started dancing. I began dancing to "Kung Fu Fighting" song when I was five. I didn't realize it then, but now I know dancing isn't just an after-school subject, it continues to change my life. I've been dancing for over seven years. I love dancing! I danced at competitions and even in our school talent show. I also do theater classes, and I enjoy that, but there's nothing like dancing to me. I danced tap, jazz, ballet and hip-hop. I started "team dance" last year and I love it! I am continuing it this year as well.

I am dancing a musical theater piece for my solo this year. It is called, "I Like to Fuss." It is a very old song. This will be my first time performing a solo competition. The time I performed a solo at school, the song was called, "Forget About the Boys." In this year's main competition, we are going to Universal Studios to perform, but I don't know where the other two competitions are.

“Comp” is short for competition and that’s where your dance company forms a team which is called, “team dance” and you practice it for a long time until you know the dances well. Then, you go and perform somewhere. I do comp and recitals. Recitals are when you learn your dance for a shorter amount of time and perform in front of parents. Comp is like dance moms. I will say comp is harder than recitals. That is my dance life, which I love!

RAYLAN GREEN, GRADE 7



Morrison School High School students visit the Barter Theatre for the Young Playwrights’ Festival.

Adopted

I was adopted. My parents got divorced and they had 2 girls aka my sisters and I love them. My parents were there when I was born. I have a twin, but I went home first because I was the heaviest. My last name was changed when my wonderful parents adopted my twin brother and me. I’m so thankful for them. I love my last name now. I still get to see my sisters and I am happy that I was adopted. I’m thirteen and happy as can be. I love having my dad and hanging out with him. My mom is great, too. Being adopted by my dad and mom is the best thing in the world!

DYLAN HELMS, GRADE 7

Our Family’s Candy Store

The candy factory that my family owns is called “Helms Candy.” We make stick candy and pops. The flavors of the stick candy are peanut butter, clove, lemon, horehound, peppermint, assorted, broken stick. The pops are red, orange, blue and yellow, I think that’s all the flavors. I will share how we make them. You need hot

water and sugar then mix it. We put it in a big round thing and then into the furnace. Let it cook until it gets between 270-325 degrees. Next, pour it out on a big table and let it cool but don't let it get hard. Then, grab a little bit of it (about the size of a book) then you mix that and you will have strips. I can't tell you about the other part though because I don't remember. The candy goes on a candy roller, and it makes the stick candy. That's how the stick candy is made.

Now I'm telling you what some machines are like, so we have a batch roller, which is the stick candy machine. The pops machine stamps the candy, puts a stick, wraps it and goes down a belt. It will cool down the candy, and you will have a pop. Now, we have the mixer, not your daily one, another one much bigger. It mixes the candy then you bring it to the crusher to be crushed. This mixes it, but you don't want to put your hand in there. It will crush your hand. Then, we have what I call "the hot machine," which wraps the boxes of candy and puts it in a box. That's how it is done. We ship it and that's how our candy is made.

ELLIOTT HELMS, GRADE 7

My Pets

A long time ago, I got my first pet. It was a rare type of cat, a calico. I decided to name her Callie. We have had her for a long time now and we also have two outdoor cats, who visit every day. Their names were Shadow and Violet. Shadow was a Black Cat, and Violet was a Siamese Cat. Violet had babies, but now they are nowhere to be found.

In 2024, I got another pet, a bearded dragon. We named him Bowser. We got him from my dad's friend's reptile shop. We had him for a year. He changed my life. He always sat in my room watching me play video games. I liked his company. Sometimes I gave him a bit of extra attention, and my mom fed him bugs, veggies and fruit. We gave him baths and plenty of attention. In October, Bowser passed away and now he's buried in our back yard. I miss him and will never forget him.

BENNETT PRESLEY, GRADE 8

Tracy Campbell, Middle School Language Arts

Becoming a Teacher

Someday I want to be a teacher. Because I want to teach kindergarteners decimals. It would be funny because they would be clueless on what I am talking about. I would do this because they will be ready for middle school. I am the only one in my math class that is doing decimals. I would want them to be excited for decimals and I would teach each student what they need to learn.

Hello, I am Alexa Artrip. I am from North Carolina. I have two cats and a dog that always gets into trouble. I love math, reading, and science. I love school. My favorite holiday is Christmas. My favorite color is blue. My birthday is April 15, 2015. I want to become a teacher because I love school.

I interviewed one of my teachers. There is more to Mrs Campbell than meets the eye. Her favorite thing about being a teacher is seeing people grow. She became a teacher because when she was in fourth grade she read a book called The Miracle Worker. In the book a lady named Annie Sullivan made a huge difference by teaching Helen Keller, who was blind and deaf. Mrs. Campbell was inspired to become a teacher when she read about her. Her favorite memory was when she taught a kid that was born with only half of his brain and he wrote his name all by himself for the first time. She let him run in the halls and say he wrote his name all by

himself and everyone was cheering for him. She wanted to work at Morrison because there are kids that can be challenged how they need to be challenged.

ALEXA ARTRIP, GRADE 6

The Garden of Three

There is a garden that exists, yet is out of reach.

The Garden Of Grace-where the three rest in the presence of the garden.

Florist Of Faith, The Horizon of Hope, and The Love Of Living-that is given through the heart of the World in flowers.

The world is not known of, yet it's the place of mercy. The garden is away from space and time-where there is an eternity that does not dread, only moves on.

The land is a banquet of beauty that spreads out vast into The Horizon, and each flower of the world in the garden is a story of a twist a Miracle during dread, Mercy within unwilling, Faith with out knowing, Hope with out feeling, or either Love without understanding, and each and everyone of those flowers are the form of an impact caused by a response.

A new perspective from an outcome that wasn't expected, that was no one's first intention, or even something that couldn't be stopped, yet had a greater outcome that formed and changed that life of someone that made an impact that changes the color of the world. Different shades of all variations of flowers and trees, monuments of holy ground, battle fields, worn out houses, old wind mills, regions beyond regions of different types of vegetation, yet no other sign of life, besides pollinating insects.

There is no mankind, only an angel by the name of Zenobia. Zenobia is the florist of the world, and tends to the world as if it is a garden and lives in it with freedom. She is the Florist of Faith.

HEATH BESS, GRADE 8

The Emerald Isle

(Intro)

Green fields drowned in crimson tides,
Names carved thin where the old kings died.
Emerald dream, but the soil still weeps,
Beneath cold stone, the hunger sleeps.

(Verse 1)

Songs of rebels, voices torn,
Castles crumble, thrones are worn.
Shadows of famine, fire, and chains,
Still the isle remembers their names.

(Chorus)

THE EMERALD ISLE!
Built on sorrow, blood, and guile!
THE EMERALD ISLE!
We bleed for beauty, burn in style!

(Verse 2)

Cold night air cuts through broken cups,
Bagpipes cry over shuttered pubs.

Sailors lost in Atlantic dark,
Names scratched thin on a splintered plank.

(Pre-Chorus)

Sing me a song of the banshee's call,
One for the lost, one for us all.

(Chorus)

THE EMERALD ISLE!
Built on sorrow, blood, and guile!
THE EMERALD ISLE!
We bleed for beauty, burn in style!

(Bridge)

"A land of saints... a land of slaves.
A land of poets... a land of graves.
We drink, we fight, we curse, we sing...
Forever bound to the emerald ring."

(Breakdown)

RAISE THE FLAG! (RAISE THE FLAG!)
LET IT BLEED! (LET IT BLEED!)
FROM THE GRAVE! (FROM THE GRAVE!)
WE ARE FREE! (WE ARE FREE!)

(Chorus)

THE EMERALD ISLE!
Built on sorrow, blood, and guile!
THE EMERALD ISLE!
We bleed for beauty, burn in style!

(Outro)

Green fields drowned in crimson tides...
But the spirit lives, the spirit won't die.

BRYCE COSTELLO, GRADE 7

Math

Have you ever wondered where Math came from? Maybe you have wondered who discovered Math. The history of Math goes way back to ancient times. People believe that the Ancient Sumerians discovered mathematics way back around two thousand BCE. When I think about it, I wonder who chose to call the number one number one. They could have called it anything and that would be what we call it today. They could have called it Baloney and we wouldn't find it weird at all. I mean if we didn't have Math I would find it really hard to do the things I love which is why it is kinda special to me.

Math wasn't discovered by one single person. It took many centuries and multiple people working together. I think math is an example of how when we work together we accomplish great things. Whenever someone mentions the word math it is usually met with a lot of complaining. Math is hard but I think it would be much harder without it.

Without Math we would not have any way to keep track of well anything. We would not have any of the comforts that we have today. That means no houses, no time, no calendars, no means of transportation except maybe horses and walking. The list goes on and on about how different it would be without math. I think we would be living like the ancient times from the Bible. I try not to look at math as a downer on my day but something that helps me through life.

Many other ancient civilizations used math for different reasons. The ancient Egyptians used math to build the pyramids using geometry. Math wasn't the same in all countries; it was used differently such as how the Inca used knotted strings for complex counting and record keeping. It's kinda similar to how kilometers are different from miles that we in the US use. Same with liters and gallons which is an example of how there isn't just one way to keep track of something.

Of all the things I could have chosen I chose to write about math; how often does a kid do that? I could have chosen to write about video games or someone special but I didn't. It just means something special so that's why I chose it. I find it fun to try and wrap my mind around a problem. I find it just amazing how I could find out how long this pipe needs to be or what is the area of my yard. It's the little things I find amazing.

GAGE MARTIN, GRADE 8

Mamaw

I want to introduce you to my Mamaw Cathy. She is a sweet, loving, and kind person and she is very patient. She is one of the people who made me who I am today. She is seventy-three years old and still throws a ball with me. We call it ball time.

She has told me a story about 100 times over. It's about her dad and her as a kid. She said "I'm hungry."

Her dad said, "Want some toast and butter?"

She said, "No."

Her dad said, "I would have given anything for some bread and butter on the ship when I was in the military."

I remember another story she liked to call the "Tree Lady Story". Her uncle Jeff had a horse. That horse was blind and his name was Charlie. When my mamaw would whistle really loud he would come running to where he thought he heard it so one day mamaw was cracking hickory nuts and she whistled and she heard galloping! She had to hop into a tree to not get trampled! That horse was huge so she waited and waited and finally it went away. These stories have always been interesting to me and still are. I have heard them to the point that I can quote them almost perfectly.

MAX MUMPOWER, GRADE 7

A Home

A home is a place you stay
Seasons change, night and day
Family and friends are near
So I will stay here
A home I will stay
Please don't run away

Cats will purr
And I will stir
The cold bites

As I regain my sight
I will stay warm
Through a winter storm

My home has changed
And it felt like a cage
But it is new
And I'll grow into it soon
For a home I will stay
I shall not go away

Another year has gone
I will go beyond
A new friend is made
Surprisingly they had stayed
I'm not alone
I feel warm to the bone

Again I have moved
It's all to soon
It will not happen again
That I intend
This is my home, I will stay
I will not go away

It's a new start
It will not fall apart
I am home
Through every storm
Come stay with me
A home it will be

CASSAUNDR A RICHARDS, GRADE 8

Tracy Campbell, High School English

My Life

I want to do a lot of things in life when I grow up but I just don't truly know what I want to do. I had thought of making my own building and starting a 3D print shop but I just don't know if I'll be able to make that happen. I looked into welding but I lost interest in it after I realized how dangerous it could be. I have a whole lot more years in my life before I have to make a definite decision. I am not perfect either. I've made some bad choices that shouldn't have been made.

No one's perfect though all I can do is learn from the mistakes that I make and move on in life without making that mistake twice. I have been driven into the wrong paths before. I have sinned but everybody sins I'm not the only one. I never really knew what I for sure wanted to do when I was fully grown. I still don't but

there is always time. Right now I have to focus on making good grades in school so I can make it in life. I have to just keep focusing and become a better person than I am now.

You know sometimes you think in your mind that you have to act differently so other people will like you cause I used to do that. Well that's not how you make friends. You see, a true friend would have you back and take to heart what mature examples you tell them. You don't need to act differently just so someone can like you, you have to be yourself and make friends not be someone else. Sometimes you are down, maybe you never really had friends growing up but trust me when you set a good example for others you will make it far in life. Just be yourself in life, don't follow a path you don't know where it's leading to.

CAYDEN ALVARADO, GRADE 9

I Am

I am from the North East
Where the cities reign,
I am from New York
The place is lovingly sweet.
I am from the Lord,
Who makes my life wonderful,
I am from the Burke family,
Who we enjoyable together
I am from the Morrison School,
Empowering other people's lives.
I am from the North East
Where the cities reign,
I am from the Morrison School,
Where friends are included,
I am from the Morrison School,
Where I help others.

DECLAN BURKE, GRADE 10

Friends

How I want my friend to be
A friend that acts just like me
One that will yell "67" really loud in a store
And turn and run out the front door
Will listen to music real loud in my car
Will step on the gas and have no regards

We drink Red Bulls, not because it's cool
It helps us stay up late when we don't have school
Some friends don't give a dang
I'm gonna listen to my boy Speed Gang

Some friends call me, Kaden Gage
Just remember I'm like Earnhardt, I can rattle your cage

I'm kind when I want but don't be fooled
I can turn into Ghost Face and also be cruel

I really like to help my friends out
When they have a problem they give me a shout
I'm really good about giving advice
All of my friends think that I'm nice

KADEN BUCHANAN, GRADE 10

The Sinking of the HMHS Britannic

The reason why I did an Origin Project on the sinking of the HMHS Britannic was because of the upcoming 110th anniversary of the sinking of the Britannic. She is the younger sister ship of the RMS Titanic. For years, I have been learning everything I have about the Titanic, her sister ships, and other ships too. The following story happened during World War I.

In the early morning of November 21, 1916, the hospital ship known as the HMHS Britannic was sailing off the coast of Greece. All of a sudden at 8:00 am, an explosion was heard by the passengers and crew. The captain would immediately think they had been torpedoed or had hit a mine. An alarm sounded and everyone began their way to the lifeboats. A crew member went to the captain and told him that the damage is coming from one of the coal bunkers in the bow of the ship on the starboard side and they are taking on water fast.

The captain would not abandon ship yet, instead he decided to run to the nearest shore and beach her because he didn't want the Britannic to sink, but unfortunately they were about 7 miles away from the nearest shore, but the captain was sure that they could make it. So, he had the ship run at full speed in order to get the ship to the shore as quickly as possible. This would involve leaving the watertight doors being left opened to allow water to flow through the ship.

Then as the sun continued to rise, another explosion was heard. This time it was coming from the boiler room mainly due to the water reaching them and surrounding them which caused a chain reaction. Soon, the captain realized that they're not going to make it. So, he told the signaler to signal their position and that they are abandoning ship.

As Britannic sank her bow began to sink faster every minute even faster than the Titanic. As people began loading the lifeboats, they weren't ready to launch because the ship was still moving, but some didn't care and they wanted to get off the ship because it was sinking. Those people boarded two lifeboats and launched into the water. But that would soon be the biggest mistake they would ever make, since Britannic's bow was reaching the water. The propellers began to rise out of water, the port side was still spinning while the middle and starboard side had stopped mainly when the engine room exploded. When the two lifeboats were released into the water, the spinning propeller was causing a suction which caused the two lifeboats to get pulled towards the propeller. The propeller would clog up the lifeboats like a knife chopping up lettuce. Soon the propeller finally stopped and the crew could begin the lifeboats down. As the bow sank even further into the water the ship was listing over to her starboard side. When the bridge went under the surface, it only caused the list to get even worse and then the ship finally slowly but surely landed on its starboard side. The funnels would begin to fall into the water one by one when the water was surrounding them. As the stern of the ship was half submerged, the bow which was under water had hit the bottom of the ocean or the sea floor because the area where Britannic went down. She sank in shallow waters, this would cause the weight of the ship to push the bow against the ocean floor and cracks began to appear on the port side and finally after 55 minutes or 1 hour

and 3 minutes HMHS Britannic finally went under and rested shortly on the sea floor. Taking 30 lives with her to the bottom. Thankfully, over 1,000 people survived the sinking.

The wreck of the Britannic would be found in 1975. Over the years Britannic is home to hundreds of creatures like fish. She now lies at the bottom of the ocean off the coast of Greece. The cause of the first explosion was later told that dives would find a piece of a possible what looked to be a mine that had been planted possibly by a submarine the day prior.

JONATHAN HALLIDAY, GRADE II

My 1998 Chevy Silverado 1500 HD

My truck was given to me by my grandad for my 15th birthday and I'm gonna get a lift for it. I have speakers for the backseats and they are installed, so I don't have backseats, it's just the big speakers. It's all blacked out except the windows and the bumpers. I'm blacking out my headlights. I'm gonna put white underglows on it.

LONDON HENDERSON, GRADE 9

My Origin

Bones that were broken healed anew,
and I can count way past two.

I'm a strong boy, dare I say,
and I'm thankful that God made me this way.
I like music, I play it a lot,
and when I say a lot I mean a lot!

I'm from Tennessee, and God has a
plan for people like you and me.

So this is my origin.

JACOB STEWART, GRADE 9

My Dad

I chose my dad for my Origin Project because I want everyone to read about my dad. He is a farmer who raises meat cows, not dairy cows. He works at Woods Paint Company too for my grandfather. He is a pretty good dad to me and I hope everyone else thinks so. I asked him about what he does for his job and he said, "I am an overseer of all projects at Woods Paint Company."

When I asked him about his best childhood memory, he told me, "When I was about eight or nine years old it was a Friday after school and they were calling for the first cold snap of the fall. We were carrying the wood getting ready for that cold snap. The leaves were changing to fall and I was so excited to wake up the next morning to help work on the farm. And the next morning I remember getting up early and going to the smoke house to cut some bacon looking all up the valley at the fires in the morning and smelling the woodsmoke and the breakfast cooking before and getting to go out and work with the men on the farm."

I asked my dad about what school was like when he was a kid, and he said, "School was way different for me than it is now. I went to a small country school where kids were from kindergarten to third grade. There were thirty kids in all. That we had no technology and things seemed less complicated."

When I asked him what the town or the country was like back then he said, "It was nice and clean air. My dad and his dad got tobacco and sold it for money. The town had fewer buildings than it does now."

I asked my dad what he thinks of society today and he said, "I think that a lot of people don't need phones. A lot of people need to work more and not be snowflakes. If my Great Grandfather PawPaw saw what society has become he may be a little sad at the people today.

NOAH WOODS, GRADE 9

Karla Rasnake Bowman, High School English

My Life with Football

There is a lot of value behind football to me. Football has changed me in good and bad ways. I am Caden Alvis-McCoy, and I'm number 57, left guard for VHS Bearcats Football. I have played football for 1 year now and I have loved it.

Some good ways football has changed me is #1 getting me back into shape, and #2 It has also made me more independent. I feel like I can do more things while I'm in shape, and it makes me feel like a better man.

There are some bad ways football has changed me too. I get mad and sometimes can't control my anger. I throw and hit stuff. And usually during the season I'm really worn out. That's because I am always trying my best out there.

CADEN ALVIS-MCCOY, GRADE 10

How Horses Shaped My Life

Ever since I was a little kid, horses always interested me, but at the time I was too young to ride. So I waited a few years till I was around 13 years old, finally I could ride my first fully grown horse, and that was one of the best experiences of my life that I will always remember. When I was around 15, we moved to a house that had horses literally in my backyard. Every day, rain or shine, I would go and spend a few minutes, sometimes even a few hours with horses.

One horse in particular I enjoyed interacting with more than the others, he was an abused horse that would barely interact with people, but over the years and the more I interacted with him and cared for him, the more he warmed up to me. But despite that, something about him still didn't seem right and I told myself that I was the one to find out what was going on. But before I could figure it out completely, we moved away and I barely got to see him anymore after that.

After that, years later, I volunteered at a horse therapy facility. I made human friends and animal friends alike. One horse there that will always have a special place in my heart is the oldest horse there out of 9. He's been there for me in the toughest of times in my life, right when I needed him. And when things got tough I'd always think of Colonel.

To me horses are strong, majestic animals that deserve a lot of respect. Some people think that horses are mean, scary animals that are out to get you, but what I always tell those people is that the horse is more scared of you than you are of them. Horses will always forever be my spirit animal and they will always have a special place in my heart.

ANTHONY BARRON, GRADE 11

Origin

Warning: Mature Content

An origin is a prologue to a book. A page in a chapter. A line in a poem. Here's how mine goes.

I originated in the Fort Belvoir Air Force Hospital, in Alexandria, VA, just outside of D.C. I was born on August 19th, 2011, just after midnight. I was born a ginger, after my Nana, who was really Irish. My family

is huge..... I am also part Greek, after my Papu. My Great Great Great Cousin, Elmer E. Ellsworth, a late American military officer, was a personal friend of Abraham Lincoln. He was also the first Union officer to die in the Civil War. Some of my family lives in Northern New York, such as Massena, Malone, and Fort Covington, where the Ellsworth Homestead, he or his family founded, resides.

My mom is amazing. She's silly, loving, and kind. She means so much to me. We used to have dance parties together.

My dad is living with his parents. He left me when I was little, due to a poor sense of responsibility, I believe, but I know he wasn't prepared to take care of me. That's not an excuse though. I loved him so much. I looked up to him. I thought he was like me, before his downfall. We used to play videogames together, talk, and laugh. He was really funny. My last memory of him was when I said "You're the best dad ever!" He was silent, I felt he was either crying, overjoyed, or just didn't know what to say, due to inexperience.

My stepdad Steve plays music. He is funny and he works at Emory and Henry. Eli is my little brother. He is so cute. He is also smart. He loves his family. I love him. His favourite word is "hat" He is about to turn 1 on January 9, 2026. Awnya is my first sister. She is 8 currently and is silly. I love her.

I lived with my Gramma (and Papa) for 9 years. My Gramma used to play with me for hours, do activities with me, walk, read, create stories, and laugh. She's so nice and caring. She still does, but I'm older and I get more tired and lose interest a bit quicker. I love her so much. My Papa used to work a lot for the government, but he's off now. He taught me how to play softball, he's funny, and smart. He has a bromance with a news reporter. He's OBSESSED with the gym, protein and America. Anytime we see or hear the word protein, we yell/say Papa! I love him.

My Grammy is amazing. She has great hugs, she is calming, she's funny, and cool. I love her. She's so sweet. Poppy is cool. He's funny, and strong. He's a disabled veteran who served in the Vietnam War. He's been through a lot. He's funny and loving. I love him.

I grew up at 10503 Fairweather Court, Manassas, VA., about 30 miles outside of D.C. I lived there for 9 years with my Gramma and Papa. We had a black chihuahua named Julian. I spent most of my time with my Gramma, because my Papa worked for DHS and FEMA. He had to take the train from Manassas, Va, to D.C. every day. He woke up at 5-6 AM, and came home at 7 pm. We had a lot of usual weekly practices. Me and my Gramma used to walk to Pizza Hut and eat there, and then walked back. I always used to say "My favorite pizza is plain cheese, with no pepperoni." for as long as I can remember. I also grew up (partially) with Amish boys In Northern NY, and I vaguely remember playing with them in the snow.

I used to play sports, too. My Papa taught me how to play softball when I was little. I started Blastball at 3-4 y/o, and T-ball from 4-7, and Manassas Calvary Blue and Grey 8U. I used to have Softball practices and games all of the time. We were on an elite travel team so we went to hotels a lot. We won many games and tournaments. I remember yelling fun chants, and having fun with our team. One of my favourite people on our team was Tank. She was so good. She inspired me to keep pushing on. I was the youngest on my team, and the fastest runner. Everyone would cheer my name. "Mars! Mars! Mars! Marleigh! Marleigh! Marleigh!" I can still hear it. Fun Fact! I got the name "Mars" from softball because I used to "hit it to Mars". so we went to hotels a lot. I was the fastest kid on my team, and the one that could throw farthest, even being the youngest. I hit many home runs and got game balls. I remember we were in an indoor tournament and I hit a home run right to my grandparents, even though there was a safety fence there. I remember the fun chants like "My name is Marleigh and you know what I got, (what do you got?) I got a team that's hotter than hot (how hot is hot?) grand slams, and home runs too (Uhuh-uhuh) let's see what ____ can do!" And "(echo) I see an H-O-L-E, Hole out there! (echo) So hit the ball out there! (echo) So hit the B-A-L-L, Ball out there! (echo) So we can win this game!" "And Mighty mighty (name) repeat Rip it up the alley repeat Run around the bases repeat Start us up a rally! Repeat" and "We wanna single just a little single, s-i-n-g-l-e single single single, We wanna double

just a little double d-o-u-b-l-e double double double, We wanna triple just a little triple t-r-i-p-l-e triple triple triple, We wanna home-run just a little home-run! H – O – H O M – H O M E R U N...HOME RUN... Name” and “There was a little froggy -- sitting on a log He rooted for the other team -- it made no sense at all. We pushed him the water, and bonked his little head. And when he came back up again, this is what he said, he said: Go!” At the end of the game we would say “We are proud of you, say we are proud of you. Give that girl a hand, say give that girl a hand.” while high fiving each other down the line. Marleigh’s up to bat! Uh oh! If I were you, I’d back way up! And See it, hit it, kiss it goodbye! Victory is Sweet, Knock ‘Em off their Feet! We don’t wear mini skirts, we just wear our softball shirts! We don’t drink no lemonade, we just drink our Gatorade! We don’t play with barbie dolls, we just play with bats and balls! And Mirror, mirror, on the wall, pretty girls can’t play ball! Let’s get dirty, let’s get mean, come on girls, let’s beat this team! And Good eye, good eye, way to watch that ball go by! And Marleigh is a friend of mine, and she can hit it anytime! And Rip nanananana! Rip nanananana! Strawberry Shortcake, Banana Split, come on Marleigh, give us a hit! If I were you, and you were me, I’d scoot my booty back! But I’m not you, and you’re not me, so stay right where you’re at! And Apple, peaches, pumpkin pie, hit that ball and make it fly! And I got a letter, a letter, I wonder who it’s from, It says it’s from Marleigh, and that she’s coming home! And she stole a base! She stole a base! The cops are leaving, the cops are leaving, cause she was SAFE!

In November 2021, we moved to Saltville, Virginia. I went to Saltville Elementary School for 5th grade. For 6th grade, I went to Northwood Middle School. It was AWFUL. I was abused and ridiculed, some of the teachers were awful, and our gym teacher made us change in front of each other. Well, we did have a tiny stall where we could change, but it was only one, and we could almost make eye contact. The Principal was AWFUL. I came home crying every day and it was awful. In 7th grade, I did K-12. (virtual school) In 8th grade, I came to Morrison School. I was so scared people were going to hate on me and hurt me. I was SO SHY. I used to hide my face with my sleeve, and I used to be scared to talk or make any mistakes. I was also scared because of my past abusive friends and that people would be like them. I have grown so much since I came here, and it’s in a good way.

MARLEIGH BARTLESON, GRADE 9

The Story of My Writing

It took one simple action of losing a childhood friend and my grandmother that set off my writing career. I never was one to express my emotions verbally so I found my voice in every single thing I wrote. From romance to a random email, I always seemed to be able to make people truly understand me with the words I type. It is hard to know what kind of topic that I am in the true mood to write, yet I have so much that I want to get out. People sometimes ask what topic of writing I favor and I often would say I do not have one, but that unlocked a Pandora’s box of questions.

Romance is the main complicated genre to write about because it is hard to believe in there being such a real meaningful kind of way to describe it. Could it be an ideal genre for me to get more into? Yes. Most times when it is written about, it is in the form of a simple fairytale or in a book, or poem. I often do not want to write it like that because I get stuck and do not know how to write the truth of it. It is the fact I need to know the truth about the genre because that is how I am certain that it is being written in the correct form. My relationship in love has been so rocky and a lot of them were built out of lies. I’ve been told not to marry, not to trust most guys, then to get married, etc.

This leads to me writing sad meaningful genre type of writings; something I succeed in a lot. My poems bring my mom to tears, and get what I want to get out. A lot of it is based on my grandmother and occasionally about my past relationships. I told someone that if I wrote a real book, it’d be called “The Way Back.” This is what I feel my struggle is leading to because sure I can not always find an ideal genre but it usually does end

up to be a sad meaningful one. It seems more easy to fake what you write because you can twist plots and hide a lot of stuff you want no one to know that happened.

My next genre that I write is fairytale kind of stories, where it features two characters and them finding their way to each other. It is very easy to write for me and I do not have to give it as much thought but there are still occasional times. Mainly, it is how the characters meet and what their struggle and plot is that catch me in a true dilemma. They could meet alone in a winter cabin or meet in a big party; because of someone or because of nature. You find that nature tends to do more work than an average person. Sometimes, there will be struggles in a relationship and you're separate but love and nature will bring you both back together if it truly is meant to be. It is kind of scary to write these kinds of things because they cause unwanted memories to come back though.

Horror is something I have recently been getting into writing a lot, it is because I love haunted movies. I struggle a lot because sometimes I have to stay below 18+ content so I am not truly able to capture the essence of horror. My guess is this is why I have not written much of these because I hate not having much to say and when I write horror, there's not really any true ideas. When writing this kind of genre, I have to ask many questions and go off of what I watched on tv and it does not feel like it is me. This is why Horror is down there with romance in what my ideal genre would be. Both genres tend to be very hard to write and cause me to abandon a lot of story ideas, not because I want to, but because I do not know what the plot is and how to end the story the way I want to.

All in all, if someone were to ask me truly what my ideal genre to write would be, it would be sad and meaningful. This is because I have a lot to say, do not need a plot, and most of the time I know how to end the writing. It would not be what I'd be comfortable writing a lot, but it would be ideal to write as a simple journal prompt. It is not my favorite genre to read and write though, but it would be wise if I wanted a simple writing topic that I'd make most sense in and can summarize. I want to be able to write more horror, but I'll wait until I am more experienced, it is not my ideal genre. Romance will never be easy for a very secret reason but it would be an ideal book genre to binge read.

HAYLEY CONWAY, GRADE II

Sportacular Experience

Playing sports has shaped me in different ways. The experiences I've had in sports are a part of who I am today. My favorite sport is soccer, and I want to be a professional soccer player in the future. I have also played lacrosse and basketball. I've played lacrosse much more than I've played basketball, but I enjoy basketball more. I've played soccer since I was 4 years old, lacrosse since I was in 4th or 5th grade, and I have occasionally played basketball.

I've played soccer for 11 years and I started by playing rec soccer. I played rec soccer for 7 years, but I wasn't very good at first. Though the more I played, the more I understood the sport and how to play it. From playing rec soccer I figured out how much I loved soccer. After playing rec for a while I became pretty good at soccer, so good that I decided to join a travel team. The travel team I joined is called Southwest Virginia Rush and I'm still on the team right now. When I first started to play for Rush, I struggled a lot more than I had ever struggled playing soccer before. That was because at Rush, there was a big learning curve, because travel soccer, which is actually competitive soccer, was much more difficult than rec soccer. What I learned from playing with Rush was to keep playing and getting better at soccer for yourself and your teammates. Also a few times I've played indoor soccer. Playing indoor soccer was fun and I had more success than usual when playing soccer because in indoor soccer it was easier to win because I could use my speed, physicality, and decent skills to easily beat my opponents. In indoor soccer, my team won most of our games and won our league one time.

From playing indoor soccer I learned more of how to be more of a leader on the field because I was one of the best players on my team.

I've played lacrosse since I was in 4th or 5th grade and I started playing the sport by playing for Bristol Rage Lacrosse. When I first started playing lacrosse, I didn't really like it, but I was forced to play it because my brother played it. At first I literally knew nothing about the sport and I had zero skills, but I got much better at lacrosse and I gained more understanding of the sport. I've periodically had fun playing lacrosse because lacrosse can be fun, but I often dislike the sport because of the physical toll of the sport, being compared to my brother, being forced to play it, and just not liking the sport and more. Playing lacrosse for Rage has had its ups and downs, but what I've learned from playing for Rage is to practice like it's a game so in a game it feels like practice. I've also played lacrosse for Tennessee Thunder Lacrosse, which was the least amount of fun I've had playing lacrosse, and maybe the least amount of fun I've had with any sport. That's because the team played during the summer when it was 90+ degrees, being compared to my brother even more, being afterthought, literally getting zero playing time, playing against seniors in high school when I was 14, having no real friends, and having unreal expectations. Playing lacrosse for Tennessee Thunder wasn't the most enjoyable, though there were a few fun moments. What I learned from playing with them is to regularly practice on your own so you can get better at skills that coaches can't teach you.

I've only played basketball occasionally, but I've had fun when playing it, more fun than I have when playing lacrosse. Some years ago I played basketball at the YMCA and I played there for some weekends starting with just practicing, then I got to play games. When playing at the YMCA, I scored my first ever three-pointer which was very exciting for younger me. I'm not sure what I learned from playing basketball at the YMCA, but I got better at basketball and found out how fun basketball is. The next time I played basketball after that was when I was 12 and played for Morrison School. When playing for school our coach, Mr. Suiter made me the starting point guard (the most important position in basketball) even though I was the youngest player on the team. That was because I was more mature than the other players on the team that wanted to be point guard. Our team didn't win any games, mostly because we were very bad teammates to each other, but when our team wasn't fighting I had a lot of fun. What I learned from playing basketball at Morrison School is the importance of maturity and leadership even though I didn't do much to keep our team from fighting.

Playing sports has shaped me in different ways and mostly for the better. Some of the main lessons I've learned are to work hard for yourself and others, how to be a better leader, how to be more mature, and to self improve. One of the many reasons why I love to play sports is because it's where I get to be myself unlike any other activities I do. Playing soccer and lacrosse at the same time has caused some conflicts before because sometimes games and practices have been on the same day for both sports, but I almost always choose soccer over lacrosse because soccer is better. I want to be a professional soccer player in the future and that's because soccer is very fun and there isn't anything else that I want to spend the majority of my life doing. Hopefully, if I'm good enough, I will win the soccer World Cup which is quite literally being world champions of soccer. Even though I want to be a professional soccer player and win the World Cup, I can't do that without gaining sportacular experiences that I can learn from.

JACOB DIAMOND, GRADE 9

Math: Foe Turned Friend

Math has always been a point of struggle in my life, with many topics flying over my head. I remember the many nights spent at my dining table with my parents trying to help me- them ready to tear their hair out, and me with tears staining my eyes. It was at these times that I tended to ask myself the same questions: Why can't I just be good at math like I am English?

That subject comes easy to me, why doesn't this?

At the time I was frustrated with myself, and unable to see the bigger picture. The middle school I was currently enrolled in had been failing me for a while, and elementary school before that. I had a lot of math concepts that I still didn't understand. I couldn't read clocks, I didn't know the majority of my times tables, and when it came to long division? I felt ready to have a panic attack on the spot. But the teachers at my schools didn't see this, and I was continuously pushed further up the grade ladder without knowing the basics. Covid hitting in the middle of my sixth grade year was the worst thing for my inexperience as well.

This same cycle continued on until January of my eighth grade year. My parents had begun doing research, unbeknownst to me, and they had come upon a place called Morrison School. They'd brought it up at dinner one night, telling me that it was a school for children that learned differently. We talked for a long while about it, and they asked me to start thinking of a decision.

Morrison changed me almost instantly, in more ways than one. I finally began to get the help in math that I'd needed since the beginning, and it was starting to be less stressful. At first, being reverted all the way to third grade math was embarrassing but after a while I realized that if that was what I needed to succeed then it was worth it. My big breakthrough came my ninth grade year, with my pre-algebra teacher, Ms. Dabney. She is a teacher that I will never forget.

Things started off rocky at first, there were things I didn't understand after being behind for so long. At times, I let my frustration get the best of me. But Ms. Dabney was undeterred. After a year of working with her one on one, and with normal class, I learned that math was not the enemy. With Ms. Dabney's help, I also learned to understand that something isn't automatically bad because I don't understand it right away. She broke down barriers I had against a subject that I didn't know could be broken down.

While math is still a struggle-point for me at times, I no longer get frustrated to the point of tears so often. This thanks to my amazing, caring teachers at Morrison who helped me to grow and understand that it's okay to not understand something immediately.

ZOE HOLMES, GRADE II

Memories of Morrison

I never thought that I would go to school. I was always under the impression that I would be homeschooled just like my sister. I presumed I was going to complete all twelve years of school at home, have a small graduation celebration, and have my diploma presented with both of my parents' signatures in the right hand corner of the paper. However, things changed my 8th grade year.

I remember it like it was yesterday; we were in my mom's van, driving to a farmer's market. A few minutes before we pulled into the parking lot, my mom got a phone call from someone. I didn't know this at the time, but she was directly speaking to our Program Director at Morrison about enrolling me at their school.

I can still vividly see my mom looking at me nervously, wondering if I would be excited to start school. She sheepishly asked me how I would feel about it, and I responded with some enthusiasm, but with some skepticism as well. I had never been to a school. The closest thing I had to attending a school was my online courses I took for a semester. This was going to be a difficult adjustment, for the both of us.

About a month before I started attending Morrison, we were invited to take a tour of the school. Once we took that tour of Morrison, a lot of my skepticism and fear dwindled. I was excited to start. I was looking forward to the change, but I didn't realize just how much I would learn from Morrison. Some of my greatest lessons and memories come from Morrison, and I wouldn't be the person I am today without it.

Morrison has always been a special place to me. Ever since the day I walked in the building, I have felt like I belong and that I matter. I have felt that all of my needs and learning have been fine tuned to my level. There's never an instance where I have felt unwelcomed, or felt like I have never had a place.

I met some of my greatest friends at Morrison. From people I've known since my 8th grade year, like Farris, to my best friends, Gabe and Zoe, I've met so many incredible people, whose relationships I hold dearest to my heart.

From reading emails in the middle of World Geography from Gabe about requesting to take my Mother to prom, to Dina creating the creepiest and most absurd drawings I've ever laid eyes on, or even Jacob doing anything but his assignments, I have some great memories. They've all been there for me, and have gotten me through some of the hardest days of my life. I would not be the person I am today without each and every single one of them.

I met some of the greatest teachers and role models during my time at Morrison as well. I have strong memories of them as well. I fondly remember all of Mr. Suiter's jokes, life lessons, and authority he pushed during my time at Morrison. I learned what it meant to be a leader, when to uphold and maintain order, when to be yourself, how to help a student struggling, how to overcome self confidence; all valuable and life long lessons I take with me into my adult years.

I can still see Mrs. Rasnake with all of her banned books, her patience, and unconditional kindness. I aspire to be like her as a teacher as well, especially with her constant kindness and care for other people. I don't know how she manages to keep her composure as often as she does, but I dream to be as patient as her.

I remember Ms. Dabney as well, and I aspire to be like her in the regards of strength, perseverance, and her ability to make the classes that seem the most boring, the most exciting. I never thought in my life I would tell you that I would enjoy taking math, but I can confidently say it has become one of my favorite subjects. As a teacher, I want to make all of my classes enjoyable, interesting, and most importantly educational.

I've learned so many valuable tools from Morrison that I apply to my everyday life, such as reflection, contemplation, consideration, and thinking outside of the box. I've learned what it means to be a role model, how to work with a team, and how to be prepared in life. Organization and order are two other key values I have come to accept and cherish in my everyday life, and I wouldn't have learned some of these tools as easily as I have without Morrison.

My time at Morrison has been extraordinarily special. And with this chapter in my life beginning to close, I look back at Morrison with happy memories, success, and confidence. As I step into college this coming year, I can confidently say that I am ready to conquer the real world and whatever it throws at me. It wouldn't have been possible without Morrison being in my life.

AIDAN JOLLY, GRADE 12

My Heritage

My family is very large with an even larger history. I have a large variety of cool and unique people in my family. Some of those people include the Watermelon Man, the Cherokee, supposedly a Scottish king, and a couple others. There was also the belief that we might have been related to the Wright brothers, but that was unfortunately false.

My parents are my Mom Kristen and my StepDad Travis. My biological father I have never met but I do know his last name, Lawrence. My Mom's parents are Reggie and Suzie Lesley. My Mom and I lived with my grandparents, my Mom's parents, on their farm for a while until my StepDad married my Mom and we moved up here.

My Grandparents on my Mom's side live in SC. My Grandfather, or my Papa, has 7 brothers and sisters total and his father is the Watermelonman. The Watermelonman is the world record breaker for growing the largest watermelons in the world. He unfortunately passed slightly before I was born so I never got to meet him, but I did get to meet his wife, my Meema, who passed away when I was very young, and my grandmother's

(or Mawmaw's) parents, my Papabill and Nana, who has a grandmother that is Cherokee Indian. I am very lucky to still have them in my life.

My other Grandparents, my StepDad's parents, live in Virginia. My grandparents had two kids, my StepDad and my Step Uncle. My Grandfather's, or Poppy's, name is David and my Grandmother's, or Naynay's, name is Debra. Both of my Grandparents' parents have passed so I was not able to meet them but I am happy that I got to meet my grandparents.

Everyone in my family is so amazing. They all have neat and amazing things about them. I am also thankful for my stepdad being there for me and the rest of my family. In conclusion I have a very large and amazing family and I am very proud to be a part of it.

ELIJAH LANE, GRADE 10



School students from Mrs. Estes' class attend a play at the Barter Theatre.

Elemental Fascination

Have you ever been so fascinated by something that you just couldn't stop studying it? This is the case for me. For a while, I have been fascinated by the periodic table of elements. From the simply structured atoms of each element to the complex structures of molecules, the periodic table has opened up a gateway to an interest in chemistry that still applies today. All of Mendeleev's periodic table, from hydrogen to oganesson, captivates me in many ways.

My interest started off with a project I did on History Day at school. I was partnered with a classmate to reenact Pierre and Marie Curie discovering the element of radium. While we were doing said project, I became very interested in radium, as well as polonium, another element discovered by the Curies. I thought it was very

fun to do this project, especially when we were dealing with the green colored water we used as radium. As you can tell, I greatly enjoyed reenacting an important moment in history involving the elements and chemistry.

After the project, I began learning the rest of the elements in the periodic table. At first, I went through a list of elements and tried to pronounce their names, but it was very hard, since I've never seen names like "molybdenum" and "darmstadtium" at the time. Then, I discovered "The Periodic Table Song" by AsapSCIENCE, to the tune of "Can-Can" by Jacques Offenbach. I played it over and over, trying to sing along and keep up with the pace as I learned the names of the elements. Eventually, I mastered the song, and I could name every single element in the periodic table without skipping any. I felt so proud of myself - I figured I could do anything in chemistry by knowing all the elements. Overall, "The Periodic Table Song" has helped me the most in learning the elements.

Today, I am known as an element expert. I can name all the elements in order of atomic number, from hydrogen to oganesson. Therefore, I have received nicknames like "Miss Periodic Table" and "Queen of the Elements". If someone says an atomic number, I can name the corresponding element. For instance, if a classmate says "30" as an atomic number, I can say "zinc". I also know many facts about the elements, such as copper being a good conductor of electricity and lithium being used in batteries. All in all, I know a lot about the elements today.

As you can see, Mendeleev's periodic table has fascinated me in many ways. From the simple hydrogen atom to the very unstable oganesson atom, the elements and their properties are truly fascinating. Overall, chemistry is very interesting to me, and its aspects have all combined to demonstrate my love of the periodic table and all of the elements in it.

OCEANA MAJCHER, GRADE II

Minecraft

Minecraft is a big part of who I am. I've played it since I was about six years old, and since then there's been a lot of updates. For anyone who doesn't already know, Minecraft is what's called a sandbox game. A game where you can do basically anything, from building to going on adventures to anything else you can think of!

My first experience playing Minecraft was fun. I barely remember it, but I do remember a swamp biome and I remember spawning a bunch of Elder Guardians to see what they were, and because it was funny. That's about all I remember. I was in creative mode, as you can probably guess if you know enough about the game. Sadly, I don't remember my first trip to the Nether or the End, but they were both probably pretty funny.

Nowadays, I mostly play in creative mode. I have Bedrock and Java editions of the game on my PC, and lately I've been playing in Spark Studio's Realism Craft map a lot. It adds a bunch of stuff that I really like, and it works well with my must-have add-ons. (Yes, this includes horror add-ons like Dwellers and Horror Survival.) Another Add-on that's a must-have for me is Tinker's Construct. It's also a Java mod, but I don't have it for Java yet. It's also a very old mod, but still a popular one.

Something else I really like about Minecraft is the soundtrack. It's very calming, and it's kinda like lofi. The more energetic tracks are really good, too. One of my favorite songs from the game is Pigstep by Lena Raine. It was added as a music disc in 1.16, the Nether Update. Some of my other favorites are Aria Math by C418, Creator by Lena Raine, Tears by Amos Roddy, and Arch-Illager's Pigstep by Hyper Potions. That last one is a mash-up of two songs, and it's a masterpiece. Arch-Illager's Pigstep isn't in any of the games, but part of the Triple Bundle EP by Hyper Potions. The three songs are actually mash-ups of songs from all three games; Minecraft, Minecraft Dungeons, and Minecraft Legends. That's all without even mentioning the lofi remixes and Pixel Remixes!

Overall, Minecraft is very important to me because I can build anything, I have lots of fond memories from it, and the soundtrack is amazing. Watch out for creepers!

ELLIE MARTIN, GRADE 9

MMA Startum

Jon Jones is the most dominant UFC champion ever. When he first entered into the UFC he was a 187lb light heavy weight at 20 years old. The Year after that he became the youngest world champion ever after just a year in the game. He went on to defend his title six times with every bout ending by way of knockout. He remained undefeated for the rest of his career by technicality.

Jon was met with his first real challenge when he fought Daniel “DC” Cormier. DC was a heavy weight with about 20lbs on Jon. This is where Jon Jones’s unbeatable mindset came in. He came out and claimed he’d beat DC in his own weight class. Jon fought DC at 207lbs and won by decision after 5 rounds making DC cry and cementing Jon among the 10 two division champs and becoming the youngest to do so.

Jon is my favorite MMA fighter of all time. I love his mentality towards the sport and competing. Jon treats fights like warmups and even works out after sometimes. He recognizes himself as the GOAT and treats every bout like he’s invincible. His style is so well rounded and trained that he is unmatched in skill.

Jon Jones has only ever “lost” once and the fight was one round against Mark Hamil and Jon was on top in mount the entire time. Jon was throwing elbows about to knock Hamil out when the ref DQ’d him on a 12-6 elbow which was illegal at the time. Jon was disqualified but came back almost immediately and won the title. He’s so inspiring because of how unstoppable he is.

In 2025 Jon was challenged by Heavyweight Tom Aspinal. Tom had 31lbs on Jon but he took the fight anyway. After a month he called Dana White and retired, undefeated. A lot of people thought Jon was scared but in reality he was beaten by time. Time got to Jon Jones before any ordinary fighter could and he retired the greatest UFC fighter of all time, and an inspiration for generations to come.

GABE MILLER, GRADE II

The Man of Many Achievements

I’m going to talk about my parents’ friend today, Jayson Troball, but we mostly just call him Troball. I only met him a few months ago around October, but since I’ve met him, I have learned many of the great things that he has done in the military.

Troball first started off his military adventure in the Coast Guard for six years from 1992-1998. During this time with the Coast Guard, he would sometimes have to hunt down pirates that were in the area. He later left the Coast Guard after six years of work because he got really sick and got Ulcerative colitis and Crohn’s disease, which would have gotten him an easy discharge from the Coast Guard. Despite that, he went back, this time as a Special Ops and was part of the ODA team (Operational Detachment Alpha). Troball was also a military contractor, and he loved that job because he was in charge of his own team, and was also given the Tomb Guard badge, which is the 2nd highest badge given.

At the Coast Guard Troball was also at the White House for around 3-4 years and during that time was also a part of the QRF (Quick Reaction Force). During his time in the Coast Guard he also won “Sailor of the Year” because he worked hard and went above the call of duty and it made him stand out. And he has been to 73 different countries during this time. Because of his excellent work and many places he’s been to, he was chosen as one of the few people who got to carry the casket for President Nixon. Being the only chosen and asked if he wanted to be one of the eight to carry it. He was chosen for the funerals out of over 58,000 other people. But with doing many things like this there were also things that he said he didn’t want to do everyday it felt like sometimes. But he had the job of a lifetime and never wanted to quit what he did.

Troball said some of the luxuries that he missed was his family, being away from them for 280 days a year. He also missed having actual good food when being away but he loved it so much, loved saving the lives that he could. Troball also with his line of work in the military wasn’t able to keep in touch with his family much

through phone calls or other ways. After Troball got into special ops he had to go through a set of training to keep him from spilling any information and test him to his absolute limits. This set of training is called SERE (Survive, Evade Capture, Resist Interrogation, and Escape) This training was rigorous and very difficult.

In conclusion, Troball is one of my parents' closest friends and has done many things that not even the regular person who had been in the military can talk about, and he is one of the most interesting people that I've ever met being able to talk for hours about the achievements that he has done.

JAKE PETERS, GRADE 10

The Story of My Life

I grew up in Bristol, Va. I just turned 18, and I live with my 3 siblings. My life wasn't always this way though. My name is Destiny Roark. I go to school at Morrison, and have been here for nearly 3 years now. This year is my junior year, and I have made quite a lot of friends. Many of the students and teachers say that the school wouldn't be the same if my sister and I weren't there.

Growing up, I didn't have a very good life and my siblings and I were very bad off. My mom didn't have very much money, and we lived in an apartment. It was quite small, and only had two bedrooms. My step-dad lived there as well.

I lived with my mom till I was 6 years old, almost 7. I was a troublemaker back then, and was almost constantly getting into something I shouldn't have. I got home from school one day and saw a box of Vanilla Wafers on the porch. I knew that my sister would want some as well so I waited. She walked out the door moments later, so I told her my plan, and we ate them. But our innocence didn't last very long. Our mom walked outside and asked where they had gone, and being me, I pointed straight to my little sister who had only eaten them because I convinced her to. My sister got punished because of what we both had done. I always blamed her for everything.

Not that long after, I spotted a bottle of shaving cream, and decided to drag my sister into this one as well. I pulled her into the bathroom and we made our plan. She agreed, so we covered everything in shaving cream. The worst part about this was that my sister left the door open, so when our step-dad walked by he saw what had happened, I blamed her again. I know it wasn't very nice of me to do such a thing, but mind you I was only 6 years old at this time.

A few days later my step-dad started talking about this toy bin filled with stuffed animals, and said they were free. I didn't believe him, but my little sister really fell for it. Later that night he told us to follow him, so we ventured outside with the only light coming from the street poles every 10 feet or so. He led us down the road, there it was the toy bin, and it was filled all the way to the top with stuffed animals. My sister and I didn't know that they were for the Salvation Army. I knew my step-dad was trouble, and couldn't really be trusted, but who was I to judge, I was just an innocent child, and I couldn't have gotten in trouble anyway, but I still cared. It was wrong. I refused to take one, but my sister did, and still has it to this very day.

She is now 15, and now she finds basically every opportunity to get me in trouble, probably because of all the times I've done it to her, but no one can say for sure. I stayed mad at her though, she always bullied me, and had always had a good arm. She often punched me in the stomach, and got in trouble everyday for it, but she never stopped because it didn't faze her at all. Punishment meant nothing to her, and never has. I would say she loves it, but who knows, and who cares.

My sister and I are very close now, but we still have our differences. We often argue about random things, but we usually get over it very fast. She and I make jokes out of most of the things in our lives anyway, we throw insults at each other all the time, and even though I'm the main one doing it, it's hilarious and really fun to do. Just the other day my friend was joking about my sister and I. I don't know them that well, but the only thing is nobody else can tease, torment, or make fun of my sister but me, unless I give them permission, or she gives

them permission herself. It's really a sibling thing, we don't really care if it's just us, or a joke between friends, but if it gets out of hand I will, and have stepped in.

I hope someone gets a real kick out of this, or helps you. Not everyone has a perfect life, but you can surely learn from it. I nearly starved everyday, but I'm lucky to be alive, and I'm glad I am. For the people who struggle with knowing their worth, or struggle everyday you are worth much more than you think. Nobody can tell you your worth, only God knows, and you develop your character not them. Do what you believe is right, fight for what you believe, and don't let anyone else tell you what you can, and can't be. Nobody determines who you are, and it's your choice.

DESTINY ROARK, GRADE II

Friends and Animals

There are quite a few friends, and animals, that help my mental health in life. Some examples are Kayla Garufi, Hayley Conway, Anthony Barron, Destiny Roark, Amber, Loco, Baby, Tater, and Snickers. The ones with last names are my friends and some of my family that mainly helps me in hard times, and the ones without last names are the animals that helped me, or did help me before they passed. Before the animals passed I was very happy, but when they all passed something changed.

Hayley and Anthony have been my best friends for about two years now, and I am glad I met them. Destiny is my sister, and Kayla is my cousin, although she feels like another sister. Amber and Loco are my birds. Baby, and Tater were our dogs that have now passed away. Mainly Baby I miss, she was my best friend when I didn't have any friends.

Snickers is my cat now. He is black, with a little dark brown and a white spot on his chest. I have had him for about half a year now. He randomly "spawned" out of our woods. And I know nothing can just "spawn" out of nowhere but it seemed like the right word for him.

Snickers is really sweet during the winter, but during the summer he runs away from everybody except for me. It's really funny because he will walk right up to me, but as soon as someone else tries to come up to him, he runs away. During the winter he walks right up to everyone and he wants attention. The ONLY time he wants attention is when he isn't out chasing female cats, and it's cold outside. But either way, I love him to death.

If I didn't have animals in my life I don't really know how my life would be. I know I probably could find something else, like my love for playing guitar, to fill the void. But also if I didn't have friends, my life would be SO much different. Even if I was homeschooled now, I would still have Hayley, Anthony, and my friend Alyvia. Alyvia is my friend from one of my old schools, and I've known her for about a year or so. She lives in a different part of Tennessee, kind of far from me. My life is a little easier when I have friends, and animals.

LYNDSEY ROARK, GRADE IO

How My School Changed My Life

This story is about how my life has changed since going to Morrison School. Before I start talking about how Morrison School changed my life, we're gonna talk about what happened before I started going to Morrison School. I was in a public middle school and I was in 8th grade. It was after my school did Virtual Learning due to Covid and I completely failed that year. The school was still going to pass me on to High School even though I failed my 8th grade year.

After that my parents decided to look for a school that will actually help me. They found Morrison School and I started in their summer school with my first ever teacher, Ms. Dabney. I did struggle very badly because I would just not want to do my work. I would try to find loopholes and shortcuts in everything I did. They made sure I did my work with no loopholes and no shortcuts.

It was a little bit better during my first actual school year. It was my 8th grade year for Morrison so I could learn what I needed to. My Homeroom teacher was Ms. Dabney and I had her for every class. I still try to find loopholes and shortcuts, but Ms. Dabney and the school would stop me and would have none of that, and actually making sure I'm doing and understanding the work unlike my public school. The school actually helped me a lot and it was worth it.

My 9th grade year at Morrison wasn't the best but it was ok. A friend I thought I could trust got me in legal trouble but I was okay because I didn't know that my friend gave me stolen property. Then a group of girls made false rumors about me. Someone told the brother of one of the girls a lie and he pushed me and my teacher dealt with it instantly. Other than that, it was a good year.

My 10th and 11th grade years were a whole lot better. I would still struggle here and there but it was doing a lot better. I had lots of fun those two years. I made lots of friends and was a lot happier. It was the best year I've had.

I'm currently in my Senior year of Morrison School as of when I am typing this. I do not regret coming to Morrison School. It was the best choice that me and my family have made. I will definitely miss all the memories I have made here at Morrison School. I hope you enjoyed reading my story.

LOGAN SIMPSON, GRADE 12

Why I Chose Morrison School

Before I started attending Morrison School I was going to Tri-Cities Christian School up until my 10th grade year. While I was there I felt pretty comfortable that I was making some friends and that my grades were good, however that changed when I began high school. In Tri-Cities Christian School, I noticed that I was declining slowly with my grades, especially in math. Math was really hard for me as I had gone from easier math to Algebra which I was not expecting to struggle with as much as I did. Unfortunately when my parents asked if there were any accommodations and or ways that the school could help me improve, they said that they were not able to help me.

Due to the struggles that I had at Tri-Cities Christian School me, and my parents started looking for a school that would work for me, and that the school would be able to have ways that they could help me through the subjects or work that I was struggling with. We looked further into Morrison and decided that it would be the perfect school for me. As I began my first year I was pretty shy, and would not talk to a lot of people, but many people have that struggle because you usually don't know the other students there. I soon began to make some friends that I trusted and liked that I could talk to. However that soon changed when that friend that I was really close to graduated, so I had to try and make some new friends.

My 11th grade year finally came around and I started noticing a change in how I was socializing with others, and I started to participate more in my classes. This allowed me to build stronger relationships with my current friends, and my new friends. Whereas in my previous years it was difficult for me to talk to others because I was so introverted. Although I am still currently working on building my social skills, I believe it has gotten a lot better in the past two years. I also wish that I continue to work on participating more in teambuilding as it will show more growth in me being social, and possibly being a leader.

I have also noticed that this year that I have talked to people who I had never really spoken with. This of course allowed me to build that relationship with those friends, and the same for them. I hope that my current friends and my new friends continue to get along and that they will treat me as they would want to be treated. Lastly I wish to push through this year, and make new friends so that I can finally graduate and to follow my career path as a meteorologist. This would not be possible without my friends that cheered me up when I wasn't having the best day, and my teachers who have really helped me to become the person who I am today.

FORD VARNEY, GRADE 12

My Family

My family means a lot to me, even if we are not perfect. We get along most of the time and there is always someone around when you need them. We joke, talk, and spend time together, and that is what really matters to me. I know I can always depend on my family no matter what happens.

My brother Jaiden is probably the most out of control person in our house. He gets mad super fast and does not think before he acts. Sometimes he slams doors, yells at everyone, and acts like he does not care about anything. It can be really annoying and embarrassing, especially when other people are around. There are days where I wish he would just calm down and act normal for once. He causes a lot of stress and problems, and sometimes it feels like everything turns into drama because of him.

But even though Jaiden acts like that, I still love him. He is my brother and that does not change just because he messes up a lot. I know deep down he is not a bad person, he just does not know how to handle his feelings. Sometimes he can actually be funny and nice, and those moments remind me why I care about him so much. I worry about him even when I am mad at him, and I want him to do better in life.

My family might be loud and chaotic sometimes but we are not broken. We support each other, stick together, and get through things as a family, even when someone is out of control and makes it harder than it needs to be.

JOEY WAKEM, GRADE 10

My Appalachian Home

The thing I like about Appalachia is that it is my home. There are many factors that make Appalachia my home. If you stay you can read about it.

Growing up in Appalachia is very different from everyone living outside of the region. When I travel to a city like Knoxville, even in the downtown area it gives a suburban feeling. That suburb feeling is what most cities outside of Appalachia miss. Going up to New York it feels cramped and dirty. Like being in an old dragon's lair. This makes Appalachia different because even though the people may act the same in other areas it's the surroundings that tie all of the experience together. However the main problem that I have with the area is that there are not really many museums. In my area there is the museum of country music and the brick museum. These are exciting for your first time, but lose their shine the fifth time you walk into the museums.

Another thing that makes Appalachia my home is my school, the Morrison School. This school has done so much for me and I feel like I have done so much for it. This school has helped me with motivating myself, and keeping me on track.

The final thing is I went through Boy Scouts and achieved my Eagle, which is an achievement not everyone has achieved. The journey to get here shaped me. Scouts helped me with cooking and first aid. During my first summer camp, my camp counselor for the cooking merit badge was making Coca Cola chicken. You cook it with Coca Cola, but the shop in the camp didn't have any Coca Cola left so he went with the next best option. He had Mountain Dew, and he cooked chicken with the Mountain Dew. This is a memory that has stuck with me for 8 years and I still look upon it with a weird satisfaction.

Thank you for reading my essay about my home. It is a special place to me. And now you know the 3 biggest factors why it is special to me.

FARRIS WARD, GRADE 12

Gamer's Paradise

At the age of nine years old, I played basic games that were only ethical for 5 year-olds. I enjoyed it for a while, but as time went on, my boredom was unleashed. But I wasn't left off the hook instantly. I sometimes

had to get approval from my mom to see if she could download whatever app that strikes my fancy. However, I always wondered, “Are there more games I can choose without getting caught?”

Of course I’m sure every child said and dreamed about that, but I was different. Some little girls wanted to play Barbie dress up, and some just wanted to paint their nails, while I wanted to explore the wonderful world of horror games. But I know what you’re thinking, “Are you seriously into gore and western blasters?” No bro, you got me all wrong. What I was really interested in were fascinating games like Granny, Goosebumps, Bendy’s Ink Machine, Hello Neighbor, and best of all, FNAF (Five Nights at Freddy’s).

First off, things weren’t always going to be easy, I knew I couldn’t just download something instantly, there was always a catch. So therefore, I investigated thoroughly. I had to figure out what the password was in order to continue my frenzy. I kept guessing, even with the stupidest and idiotic answers any nine year old could enter in, like “cupcakes”, “glitter”, “fairypops”, and “gumdrops”.

But yet the more I tried, my access was still not granted. It took me a moment to realize that there was more to it for the App Store, so I went to “Settings” to find my escape route. What I saw before me was a green bar where it says below it, “Slide to the left to enable access to non verification passwords”. I had found my jailbreak, but now the thought that came before me was, “How am I going to hide it?”

The toughest of all questions, the agony of misfortune, but I still pulled through. 2 years later, at 11 years old, I had never felt this much enjoyment on my iPad. Although through the times, I was asked questions by my parents, “Hey, how come you haven’t asked for me to download any apps for you?” I just acted casual as best I could. What I said was “I’m still hooked to the games you downloaded for me 2 years ago, I never felt so much joy!”

My mom gradually accepted it with a nod and smile. At this very point, I was somewhat in the clear, for now. Further more, I could go on about how this is so desperately important to me, but I can’t truly argue how between today and in the past of how games could be my so-called “Idol”. Today, I am 16 years old and I was and still have been a mischievous gamer.

EMMA WRIGHT, GRADE 9

Barter Young Playwrights Festival
Semifinalist: Gabe Miller of Morrison School

Morrison School’s Gabe Miller, a junior, was selected as a semifinalist in the 2025 Barter Theatre’s Young Playwrights Festival. Gabe’s play, *Hysterical Harold*, follows Harold, an increasingly desperate clown who grows more and more frustrated because no one takes him seriously as he attempts a bank heist. Congratulations to Gabe!

HYSTERICAL HAROLD

Characters:

Hysterical Harold - Nervous, manic, half-serious, half-bumbling.

Officer 1 - The hostage, terrified, weepy, dramatic.

Officer 2 - Late arrival, oblivious, thinks it’s a show.

Bank Customers - A handful of background actors, reacting with indifference or misplaced cheer.

Scene 1 – The Bank Lobby

(Lights up. A calm, boring bank. Customers wait in line, reading magazines, scrolling on phones. The CLERK stamps papers.)

(Suddenly, the doors SLAM open. Enter HAROLD, dragging OFFICER 1 by the collar with a toy-looking pistol pressed to his head.)

HAROLD

(booming voice, trembling a little)

Hands up, everybody! This is a robbery!

(Customers look up briefly, shrug, then go back to their business. A kid giggles. Someone claps once.)

HAROLD

(outraged, shaking gun at them)

I said... THIS IS A ROBBERY! (points gun at OFFICER 1) And this cop dies if you don't–

OFFICER 1

(sobbing hysterically)

Please, please, don't shoot! I have a wife! I have a goldfish!

(Still, no one reacts seriously. A customer yawns. Another pulls out a phone and records like it's TikTok.)

Scene 2 – Losing Control

HAROLD

(whirling around the lobby, gun flailing)

What is wrong with you people?! I'm dangerous! Look! (waves gun in someone's face) What is your problem?!

CUSTOMER #1

(flat)

Cute prop. You do birthdays?

HAROLD

Prop?! PROP?! This is a real–

(He accidentally honks his own nose. A squeak. Customers laugh lightly.)

OFFICER 1

(ugly crying)

I don't want to be a balloon animal!

Scene 3 – Reinforcements

(Doors open. OFFICER 2 enters, chipper. Sees the scene: clown, hostage, gun.)

OFFICER 2

(cheery)

Well, well, what's this? A show for the kiddos?

OFFICER 1

(through sobs)

It's not a show! He's serious!

OFFICER 2

(laughs, pats him on the back)

You're a riot, partner. Nice crying bit! Very realistic.

(OFFICER 2 suddenly takes OFFICER 1 by the waist and spins him like a ballroom dance. Customers clap politely. Someone whistles.)

HAROLD

(aghast, waving arms)

No! No dancing! This is a robbery! A ROBBERY!

Scene 4 – The Finale

(OFFICER 2 twirls OFFICER 1 a little too close to the CLOWN. An elbow swings out—WHAM—right into the CLOWN's groin. CLOWN freezes, lets out a strangled honk, then collapses to the floor.)

HAROLD

(whimpering, crawling toward the exit)

I just wanted... respect...

(Customers burst out laughing, pointing. OFFICER 1 sniffes. OFFICER 2 bows theatrically. HAROLD crawls out of the bank, clutching himself, tears and face paint smeared.)

(Lights fade as the customers applaud like they've just seen a comedy routine. OFFICER 1 weeps into OFFICER 2's shoulder.)

BLACKOUT.

GABE MILLER, GRADE II

Osbourn High School

Casey Beus, English Teacher, Grades 9-12
Clemencia Arboleda, ELD Teacher, Grades 9-12
Fabiana Parker, ELD Instructional Coach, Grades 9-12
Katie Munive, English Teacher, Grades 9-12
Michael Edwards, Creative Writing Teacher, Grades 9-12
Milton Ceita Da Costa, English Teacher, Grades 9-12
Rebeca Carofilis Cedeno, ELD Teacher, Grades 9-12
Ronald Nino, ELD Teacher, Grades 9-12

Romeo and Juliet

Hello, I was 17 when this happened. My name is Nelson Gabriel Alcocer Ferrufino, and this story is about when I was deeply in love with a girl who is in Bolivia. It is a story of reunion and love with the girl I loved.

This story starts with a joke I played on my girl, telling her I wanted to see her. She replied that it was impossible because we were far away. I tried to convince her, telling her I had some money and inviting her to spend a few days in a cabin in a nearby town. She hesitated, but I thought I had convinced her.

I took it seriously: I bought the ticket, booked the cabin, and told her, 'See you there. I went to the bus terminal, took a bus towards the town, and the journey began. I was nervous because everyone on the bus was older, and no more than a baby or two. The bus was super full, and the driver was driving like a maniac; we nearly crashed because of his driving. The passengers laughed instead of being worried; you could tell they were already used to those maneuvers. The road was narrow and dangerous, so my feeling was one of fear, but I was still very happy because I was going to see my, at the time, girlfriend.

I arrived at the town where we were going to meet. I spoke with the owner of the cabin, gave him the money, and he gave me the keys. To celebrate, I made a churrasco (barbecue) while my girlfriend and her sister, who her parents had sent to accompany her, or rather, to keep an eye on her, I'd say, were at the pool. We had lunch and started sightseeing. We were happy, and everything was very beautiful. The day came when we had to leave. As I was on the bus heading to my city, I was passing through a town where I knew she would be with her parents. I thought about it and said to the driver, 'Stop!' I wanted to stay with her. I got off and went to find her in the square where she was. I told her, 'I want to have many more days by your side.

When I stayed with her, I met her parents. They invited me to eat and took me to a hotel. I paid for it, and in the middle of the night, I couldn't stop laughing because I thought I would be staying at their house. Neither the internet nor the television in the hotel worked.

The next day, I was about to activate a mobile data plan, but my girl was already waiting for me outside the hotel to invite me to eat chicharron and tour her town to get to know it. Her parents invited me to their home and offered me accommodation so I wouldn't have to stay in the hotel anymore. Her father took me fishing, and I had the opportunity to talk with him. It was New Year's, and we spent it together.

The first day of the year started with problems between her parents, so her mom took us to a river to lighten the mood. At night, they allowed me to share a room with my girlfriend, but I slept on the floor out of respect for her and her parents. However, the cold didn't let me keep that promise all night, and I woke up next to her, but always respectfully. On the last day, I said goodbye and thanked everyone for the pleasant moments and the kindness with which they treated me. I am no longer with the person my girlfriend was back then, but I will always remember those dreamy days.

After living through that experience, I learned that when one is in love, they don't control their emotions. Being in a relationship implies having a strong mind that thoroughly evaluates the decisions to be made. Also, when traveling, unforeseen things can happen, and it is better to try to be prepared for most situations.

Julieto y Romea

Hola, tenía 17 años cuando pasó esto, mi nombre es Nelson Gabriel Alcocer Ferrufino y esta historia trata de cuando estaba muy enamorado de una chica que está en Bolivia. Es una historia de reencuentro y de amor con la chica que amé.

Esta historia empieza con una broma a mi chica, diciéndole que quiero verla y a lo que ella responde que es imposible porque estábamos lejos, trato de convencerla diciéndole que tenía un dinero y que la invitaba a pasar unos días en una cabaña en un pueblo cercano, ella duda, pero yo pienso que la he convencido.

Me lo tomé en serio, compré el ticket, reservé la cabaña, y le dije, nos vemos allí. Voy a la terminal de buses, tomo uno hacia el pueblo y empieza el viaje, yo estaba nervioso porque todos en el bus eran mayores y algún que otro bebé, el bus estaba super lleno y el chofer manejaba como loco, casi nos estrellamos por su forma de conducir, los pasajeros reían en lugar de estar preocupados, se notaba que ya estaban acostumbrados a esas maniobras. El camino era angosto y peligroso, entonces mi sentimiento fue de miedo, pero igual estaba muy feliz porque iba a ver a mi, en ese momento, novia.

Llegué al pueblo donde nos íbamos a encontrar, hablé con el dueño de la cabaña, le doy el dinero y él me da las llaves. Para festejar hice churrasco mientras mi novia y su hermana, quien sus padres enviaron para acompañarla, diría yo, para vigilar, estaban en la piscina, almorzamos y empezamos a turistar, estábamos felices y todo era muy bonito.

Llegó el día donde ya debíamos irnos, cuando me encuentro en el bus rumbo a mi ciudad, y voy atravesando un pueblo en el que sabía que ella se encontraría con sus padres, pienso y le digo al chofer, ¡deténgase! Yo quiero seguir con ella, me bajé y fui a buscarla a una plaza donde ella estaba, le dije: quiero tener muchos más días a tu lado.

Al quedarme con ella conocí a sus padres, me invitaron a comer y me llevan a un hotel, yo lo pago y en medio de la noche no puedo parar de reír ya que pensaba que me hospedaría en la casa de ellos, ni el internet ni la televisión del hotel funcionaban, al siguiente día estaba por ir a activar un plan de datos móviles, pero ya mi chica me estaba esperando afuera del hotel para invitarme a comer chicharrón y recorrer su pueblo para conocerlo, sus padres me invitan a su casa y ofrecen estadía para que yo ya no estuviera en el hotel, su padre me lleva a pescar y tuve la oportunidad de hablar con él. Era año nuevo y lo pasamos juntos, el primer día del año comenzaron con problemas entre sus padres y su mamá para suavizar el ambiente nos llevó a un río, en

la noche accedieron a que compartiera el cuarto con mi novia, pero yo dormí en el suelo por respeto a ella y a sus padres, pero el frío no me dejó mantener la promesa toda la noche, amanecí junto a ella pero siempre con respeto. Al último día, me despedí y agradecí a todos por los momentos tan agradables y la amabilidad con que me atendieron. Ya no estoy con quien entonces fue mi novia, pero siempre recordaré esos días de ensueño.

Luego de vivir aquella experiencia, aprendí que uno enamorado no controla sus emociones. Estar en una relación implica tener una mente fuerte y que evalúe muy bien las decisiones a tomar. También que cuando se viaja, pueden pasar cosas imprevistas y es mejor tratar de estar preparado para la mayoría de las situaciones.

NELSON ALCOCER, GRADE 10

The Never Sent Letter

Hello, my name is María Almanza. Today I want to share a story that marked my life and taught me the value of expressing my feelings, while I still have the chance. I'll tell you about my uncle, a person who left an indelible mark on my heart. This story began with a letter I wrote to him; a letter I'll never be able to give him. It speaks of all the love, gratitude, and words I once wanted to say to him. With this story, I want to reflect on how life sometimes teaches us, through pain, that time doesn't always wait and that every moment with the people we love could be the last without us even knowing it.

I remember that trip to Viotá (a small town in Colombia) so clearly. We went together with his wife, my grandmother, and my cousins. Those were days filled with laughter, stories, and simple moments that, without us even realizing it, became eternal memories. Being by his side was always synonymous with joy and affection. Upon returning from that trip, something inside me compelled me to write him this letter. I didn't quite know why, but I felt the need to put into words how much I admired him and how grateful I was to have him in my life. However, upon our return, we all fell ill with COVID, since this whole story took place in 2021 (a time when this virus was spreading worldwide). It affected him much more than the rest of us; his health began to deteriorate rapidly, and that impulse I had to write to him took on even greater meaning.

I wrote the letter from the heart. In it, I thanked him for his love, his advice, every lesson he taught me, and for being such an important figure in my life. I wanted to give it to him on the last day I would see him (my family and I had planned a barbecue at his house, but it couldn't happen because two days before, we received a call; they were going to intubate him. We couldn't see him again). My grandmother managed to speak with him before they sedated him, and his last words were: "Don't bother me anymore, let me rest, I want to rest now." That phrase is etched in my mind and soul. I couldn't give him that letter, and since then, I've kept it like a piece of myself left unsaid, a goodbye that was never spoken aloud.

I remember perfectly the moment I found out. I was checking my phone and saw a post from his brother, my other uncle: "I will always carry you in my heart, little brother." The message was accompanied by a collage of photos. I stared at the screen in silence until I called my grandmother. She took a while to answer, and when she did, through tears, she told me, "Your uncle just passed away." I didn't know how to react. I stared at a fixed point, unable to process it. I just hugged my mother tightly, went outside to look at the sky, and asked God to receive him and watch over the family from above, as he always did in life. He was 56 years old. Since his passing, our family has never been the same. We were close because of him, but with his absence, everything fell apart. We miss that father who guides, who cares, who protects. Although deep down we all know that he continues to do so from heaven. He left an enormous legacy, full of love, joy, and wisdom. I am deeply grateful to have shared so many moments with him. I remember when I was studying at a Japanese school, I learned both English and Mandarin, and every time I went to his house in Bogotá, he would make me sing the school songs and laugh heartily at my antics. Today, those memories are treasures I cherish.

His passing taught me a great lesson: we should never wait to say what we feel. Life is fragile, and the words we keep silent can become the burden we carry later. I learned that gestures, hugs, and "I love you" should be given while we're alive, when they can still be heard. That's the lesson I learned from "the never-sent letter": that love not expressed in time can hurt more than the loss itself, and that every day with the people we love is an opportunity to remind them how much they mean to us.

La Carta Que Nunca Envié

Hola, mi nombre es María Almanza, hoy quiero compartir una historia que marcó mi vida y me enseñó el verdadero valor de expresar lo que sentimos mientras aún tenemos la oportunidad. Hablaré de mi tío, una persona que dejó huellas profundas en mi corazón. Esta historia nace de una carta que escribí para él, una carta que aunque nunca logré entregarle, guarda todo el amor, la gratitud y las palabras que alguna vez quise decirle, a través de este relato quiero reflejar cómo a veces la vida nos enseña con dolor que el tiempo no siempre espera y que cada momento con las personas que amamos, puede ser el último sin que lo sepamos.

Recuerdo con claridad aquel viaje a Viotá. Fuimos juntos con su esposa, mi abuela y mis primas. Fueron días llenos de risas, anécdotas y momentos simples que sin saberlo se convirtieron en recuerdos eternos. Estar a su lado siempre era sinónimo de alegría y cariño. Al volver de ese viaje, algo dentro de mí me impulsó a escribirle esta carta. No sabía bien el porqué, pero sentí la necesidad de plasmar en palabras lo mucho que lo admiraba

y lo agradecida que estaba por tenerlo en mi vida. Sin embargo, al regresar, todos enfermamos de COVID ya que toda esta historia fue en 2021 (época en la que este virus estaba propagándose a nivel mundial). A él le afectó mucho más que al resto, su salud empezó a empeorar rápidamente y ese impulso que tuve de escribirle, cobró aún más sentido

La carta la escribí desde el corazón. En ella le agradecí por su amor, por los consejos, por cada enseñanza y por haber sido una figura tan importante en mi vida. Quise dársela el último día que lo vería (junto a mi familia, se había cuadrado un asado en su casa, pero no se pudo llevar a cabo porque dos días antes, recibimos una llamada; lo iban a entubar). No pudimos volverlo a ver, mi abuela logró hablar con él antes de que lo sedaran y las últimas palabras fueron: “no molestes más, déjeme descansar, ya quiero descansar.” Esa frase quedó grabada en mi mente y en mi alma, no pude entregarle esa carta y desde entonces la guardo como un pedazo de mí que quedó pendiente, un adiós que jamás se dijo en voz alta.

Recuerdo perfectamente el momento en que me enteré. Estaba revisando mi celular y vi una publicación de su hermano, mi otro tío: “te llevaré siempre en mi corazón, hermanito”. Acompañaba el mensaje un collage de fotos. Me quedé mirando la pantalla en silencio, hasta que llamé a mi abuela. Tardó en contestar y cuando lo hizo, entre lágrimas me dijo: “su tío acaba de fallecer”. No supe cómo reaccionar. Me quedé mirando un punto fijo, sin poder procesarlo. Solo abracé fuerte a mi mamá, salí a mirar el cielo y le pedí a Dios que lo recibiera y que él cuidara a la familia desde arriba, como siempre lo hizo en vida. Tenía 56 años. Desde su partida, nuestra familia no volvió a ser la misma. Éramos unidos gracias a él, pero con su ausencia, todo se desmoronó. Hace falta ese padre que guía, que cuida, que protege. Aunque en el fondo todos sabemos que él desde el cielo lo sigue haciendo. Dejó un legado enorme, lleno de amor, alegría y enseñanza. Agradezco profundamente haber compartido tantos momentos con él. Recuerdo que cuando estudiaba en un colegio japonés, aprendía tanto inglés como mandarín y cada que iba a su casa en Bogotá, me hacía cantar las canciones del colegio, reía a carcajadas con mis ocurrencias. Hoy, esos recuerdos son tesoros que guardo con el alma.

Su partida me dejó una gran lección: nunca debemos esperar para decir lo que sentimos. La vida es frágil, y las palabras que callamos pueden convertirse en el peso que cargamos después. Aprendí que los gestos, los abrazos y los “te quiero” deben darse en vida, cuando aún pueden escucharse. Esa es la enseñanza que me dejó “la carta que nunca envié”: que el amor no expresado a tiempo puede doler más que la pérdida misma y que cada día con las personas que amamos, es una oportunidad para recordarles cuánto significan para nosotros.

MARIA VALENTINA ALMANZA, GRADE 9

My Cute Kitty

One day, a girl told me that her boyfriend was giving away his kitten because he could no longer keep him due to some problems he was having. I mentioned the kitten to my mom and asked if I could take him home, and she said yes. Then, on December 24th, they came to my house and gave him to me. He was a very thin little thing with a big head and big eyes. I really liked his spots, the whisker on his snout, and his green eyes.

At that time, we were planning to move, and the truth is that moving with him was a bit complicated because he didn't trust me that much yet. After we had been there for two months, the owner of the house said they were going to install some things. My mom told him that no one would be home, but the man said it wouldn't matter and that he would still go to do the work. Later, he said that when he arrived, he didn't see anyone. They were bringing in materials and left the door open. When he went to look for the cat, he said the cat wasn't there.

The owner called my mom to tell her the cat had escaped. My mom asked her boss if she could leave for a while because something had gone wrong. When my mom got home, she called my sister to help look for him. The owner and my mom left together to search, and my sister went on her own.

After about an hour of searching, my sister found him around 25 minutes from home. She said she found him near a river, trying to stay warm. She picked him up and brought him back home. Then she sent me a photo telling me he was okay.

I told my friend everything that had happened, and she told me that something similar had happened to her boyfriend's cat, but that theirs disappeared for a week before they found him through Facebook. Nowadays, I sometimes take my kitty outside, but always with me, so he doesn't get bored, and so I can make sure he stays safe.

JOVANNA ALTAMIRANO, GRADE II

The Best Christmas

Hi, my name is Marisol, and I wanted to share this story because I think Christmas 2024 was the best I've ever had. After all, it was the first one I was able to spend in the United States. A big part of the happiness I felt that day was thanks to my parents giving me my puppy, Kiara.

I felt excited, since this was going to be my first year in the United States, and also because my mother, since I was in El Salvador, had mentioned that I was going to have to attend school, and that excited me a lot. Before I came, my sister told me that it snowed a lot, that was one of the things that also made me very excited, but really what I was most excited about was spending Christmas here with my family, and because since I was in the country they had promised me one thing, that they were going to buy me what I longed for most, which was a puppy. I spent all of Christmas thinking about the gift my mother had promised me, and also a little nervous because I didn't know exactly if I was going to receive the gift I expected or something else. I didn't eat a single bite all night because of the excitement and nerves. As the time approached, my mother started giving me lots of clues because I kept asking her questions. After she stopped giving me clues, I sat in my room wondering what my gift would be, because my curiosity was killing me. But when it was almost time to open the presents, my mom called me downstairs to open them. When I went downstairs, everyone was ready to exchange gifts.

My mom and my uncles were smiling a lot, and I didn't know why. When my cousins finally finished opening their presents, it was my turn. I was so happy, even though I couldn't see my present anywhere. But suddenly, my mom appeared with a blanket and a moving bundle in her hands. When it started barking, I realized it was my most anticipated gift: my puppy. The moment I saw her I fell in love with her instantly. When my mom handed her to me, I didn't want to let her go. New Year's was approaching, and it was time to watch the fireworks. That's how our beautiful Christmas ended.

From that day, I learned that no matter how long they make you wait, your gift will always arrive, no matter what, but you must be very patient.

La mejor Navidad

Hola, me llamo Marisol, y he querido contar esta historia porque creo que la Navidad del 2024 fue la mejor que he pasado, porque fue la primera que pude pasar en Estados Unidos. Gran parte de la felicidad que tuve ese día fue gracias a que mis padres me regalaron mi perrita, Kiara.

Me sentí emocionada, ya que este iba a ser mi primer año en Estado Unidos y también porque mi madre desde que estaba en El Salvador me había mencionado, que iba tener que asistir a la escuela y eso me emocionaba mucho y antes de venirme mi hermana me habló que caía mucha nieve, esa era una de las cosas que también me hacían demasiada ilusión, pero en realidad por lo que me daba más ilusión de todo era pasar una navidad aquí con mi familia y porque desde que estaba en país me habían prometido una cosa, que me iban a comprar lo que más anhelaba que era un cachorro.

Pasé toda la navidad pensando en el regalo que mi madre me había prometido y también un poco nerviosa porque no sabía exactamente si me iban a entregar el regalo que yo pensaba u otro, en toda la noche no probé

un trozo de comida de la emoción y nervios, cuando iba llegando la hora mi madre llegó a darme muchas pistas porque yo le preguntaba mucho, después que sólo me dieran pistas me quedé sentada en mi cuarto pensando en qué iba a ser mi regalo, porque la curiosidad me estaba matando pero cuando ya iba llegando la hora de abrir los regalos, mi mamá me llamó que bajara de mi cuarto para abrir los regalos, cuando bajé todos estaban listos para intercambiar regalos.

Mi mamá y mis tíos estaban sonriendo mucho y yo no sabía por qué, cuando ya mis primos terminaron de abrir sus regalos por fin era mi turno, yo estaba muy feliz aunque yo no veía mis regalos por ningún lado. Pero de pronto mi mamá apareció con una colcha y un bulto entre sus manos que se movía y cuando empezó a ladar deduje que era mi regalo más esperado, mi perrita, y luego de verla me enamoré de ella al instante, cuando mi mamá me la entregó, después ya no la quería soltar, se acercaba el año nuevo y era la hora de ver los fuegos artificiales, así terminó nuestra hermosa navidad.

Desde ese día aprendí que no importa cuándo te hagan esperar, tu regalo siempre llegará sin importar nada, pero debes tener demasiada paciencia.

ELIZABETH AMAYA, GRADE 10

Re-Brush Cross a Page

Colored ink splatters across the page
The same splatter of colors that fills everything in their life,
Purples of an old friend long gone,
Greens being one of the few colors of themselves,
Reds from the blood they have felt,
Blues from the beautiful skies that shine through,
Never the same patterns
But also not always the same colors,
sometimes the artists uses a new palette,
different shades,
just like how they conduct themselves,
each breath
each movement,
It is always theirs, but never one hundred percent theirs.
Like a missing limb,
the artist learned to work around,
but the limb is still gone with scars to show.
Same goes for every piece of work,
Always their own,
But the colors and splatters
Are always based from the same ink brand,
A brand they could never be seen not using,
An ink that flows through them,
Always pumping,
Always guiding them.
Like the ink is trying to fill something,
left in the universe.
An ink that is pungent through them
Always visible to all,

All who listen,
All who can see,
All who the artist shares about.
An ink that splatters everywhere,
Never able to be contained
But is very easy to label
To classify and mark,
A mark that screams of an attempt to imitate
An artist long gone,
An admiration of their artworks,
their canvases and paper,
a bleeding mark.
But somehow unnoticeable.
Like a ghost
Haunting a person,
Whispering ideas,
Pushing things around on the canvases,
But the ink isn't malicious,
It just follows,
following from page to page,
canvas to canvas
like the artist's signature,
Splattering onto whatever they touch.
Like an open wound,
Or sometimes just dripping like an open scab,
Bleeding everywhere,
But never causing a scene,
just staining the artist's clothes,
forever changing the fabric color,
but only noticeable to the artist.
Until the art is done,
the ink flows again
bleaching away,
staining everything it touches,
Just like its most recent creation,
the artist is still chasing the same ghost,
still trying to fill a void,
a void in themselves,
left by the artist they admire.

ZANDER ANDRES, GRADE 12

My New Beginning, My Way to My New Home

From the mountains and volcanoes of El Salvador, I left with hope in my soul and a heart full of dreams. I left behind my land, my people, and my memories to search for a future with new opportunities. The road was

not easy. There were painful goodbyes, moments of fear, long lines, and the uncertainty of the unknown. But there was also learning, growth, and the strength to keep moving forward.

Today, in the United States, I am slowly building my new home. Every step feels like a small victory, and every effort brings me closer to my goals. I carry with me the love for my country, the strength of my history, and the hope for a better tomorrow.

School here is very different from school in El Salvador. For example, in El Salvador, we used to have time outside to eat during recess, and here in the United States, that doesn't really exist. The class schedules are also different, and the subjects feel different, too. Sometimes it takes time to get used to everything, but I am learning little by little.

My family is doing well here. I spend time with my aunts, uncles, and cousins, and they make me feel supported. I miss my grandfather very much. I also don't see my mom often because she works a lot, and that can be hard. Still, I know she is working for our future, and that gives me strength.

After months of planning and waiting, I finally arrived at my new home in the United States. My family and I left El Salvador behind with everything it meant to us. I remember looking at the mountains from the window back home and thinking about all the memories there. Sometimes I still picture those mountains and the buildings and streets I grew up with. They are always with me in my heart.

In El Salvador, we mostly have two seasons: the dry season and the rainy season. You could feel the difference through the air, the colors, and the daily life around you. During the dry season, the land would turn golden and dusty. Some trees lost their leaves, and others bloomed with bright colors before the rain came. The sky was a deep, clear blue. During the rainy season, everything became green and full of life. The mountains and fields looked fresh and beautiful, and rainbows often appeared after the rain. In the United States,

I am learning to feel four different seasons. In spring, the trees start to grow again, and flowers begin to bloom. In summer, everything is green and full of color. In autumn, the leaves turn red, orange, and yellow before they fall. In winter, many trees are bare, and sometimes there is snow. Experiencing these seasons is new for me. Each one feels different, and each one teaches me something about change and adaptation.

Starting over in a new country is not easy, but I am trying my best. Every day I learn something new about this place and about myself. I still carry El Salvador with me, the mountains, the people, and the memories, but I am also creating a new life here. This is my new beginning, and I am finding my way to my new home.

JOSE ARGUETA, GRADE 9

A Little Bit of My Life

My name is Beily Aroche, I'm 14 years old, I'm from Guatemala, and my story is about my life here in the US, the whole process, and how it's going. I'm about to celebrate two years in this country, and I'm used to it now, compared to the beginning.

My brother and I traveled together from Guatemala, since my dad had to come before us. We both knew we would have to leave our country and our entire lives behind to start a new one here. Anyone would say that living here makes you happy and that you're better off. It's true, you are better off, but you don't find the same happiness you had before when you were in your country. We went through a lot here, just like in Guatemala, but we were able to overcome it. Obviously, I felt a little sad because I was leaving my country and my family, but now I'm doing well. In fact, I've been feeling good for a month since I arrived.

After two or three months, I started middle school, and everything started to get a little more difficult since I was hearing more English and I had to speak it, and it was hard for me because I didn't know much, and it was very complicated. I had the bad luck of falling into what people here do, but I was also lucky to be able to get out of all that and start doing things right. Some immature girls started bothering me, but I dealt with

it and overcame it. Then, I passed the grade, and now I'm in high school, and everything is going very well. I understand English now, and I can speak it too.

After all that, things are going well for me now. I've made new friends, I'm doing better in high school, and I get along better with my mom; we have a good relationship, and the same goes for my family. The story ends with me learning to overcome everything I went through, with or without anyone's help, and now I'm doing well.

I learned to communicate more, and I feel good. Moving to a new place where you don't know anything is difficult, but you know how to adapt; in fact, you have to adapt.

Un poco de mi vida

Soy Beily Aroche, tengo 14 años, soy de Guatemala y mi historia trata sobre mi vida aquí en EE.UU., todo el proceso y cómo me va. Voy a cumplir dos años en este país y creo que ya estoy acostumbrada, comparada con el principio.

Mi hermano y yo viajamos juntos desde Guatemala ya que mi papá tuvo que venir antes que nosotros, los dos sabíamos que nos iba a tocar dejar nuestro país y dejar atrás toda una vida para comenzar otra aquí, cualquier persona diría que vivir aquí te hace feliz y que te va mejor, es cierto, te va mejor pero no encuentras la misma felicidad que tenías antes cuando estabas en tu país, pasamos por muchas cosas aquí tanto como en Guatemala, pero supimos superarlo, obviamente me sentía algo triste porque iba a dejar mi país y a mi familia, pero ahora estoy bien, de hecho me encuentro bien desde un mes después de mi llegada.

molestar, dos o tres meses entré a middle school y todo empezó a ser un poco más difícil ya que escuchaba más inglés y me tocaba tener que hablarlo y me costaba hacerlo ya que no sabía tanto y era muy complicado, tuve la mala suerte de caer en lo que la gente de aquí hace pero también tuve buena suerte al poder salir de todo eso y empezar a hacer las cosas bien, también algunas niñas inmaduras me empezaron a molestar pero lo arreglé y superé, luego, pasé el grado y ahora estoy en high school y todo me va muy bien, ya le entiendo al inglés y también lo puedo hablar.

Después de todo eso ya estoy bien e hice nuevas amistades y me va mejor en la high school y me llevo mejor con mi mamá, tenemos buena relación e igual con mi familia. La historia termina en que después de todo lo que pasé supe cómo superarlo con o sin la ayuda de nadie y ahora me va bien. Aprendí a comunicarme más y me siento bien, mudarse a un nuevo lugar en donde no conoces nada es difícil, pero te sabes adaptar, de hecho, tienes que adaptarte.

BEILY AROCHE, GRADE 9

My Trip from Algeria to the USA

My name is Imad, and I recently moved to the United States. Leaving my country with my family was a huge change, and my new experiences in America were a big part of my life. Everything was new and different. My story is about my new experiences in America.

After we moved, we packed our things and said goodbye to our family. I felt sad to leave my friends. I was also excited to see new places; I wanted to explore things I had never seen before. I hoped for a better life in America.

When I arrived, I noticed that everyone was speaking English. I didn't understand much at first, which made me feel a little shy and scared. I tried hard to learn the language. Learning English helped me to speak with new people.

I started going to school and getting to know my classmates, playing sports, and participating in new activities. I tried American food for the first time and learned about different traditions. I also made new friends, which helped me practice my English.

After several weeks, I became more confident, and life began to become easier for me. I was happier because I understood more. I learned that moving to a new country is a good experience.

ر ن م رثا زجلا ي لا ا

ي مسد ، دامع دقو تلتقتنا ا رُخؤم ي لا ا تايلاولا تنجدة دحتما ن م يلب عم ي تلتاء ناك لئلا اريغت اريبيك ي في يبراجت قديجلا ي في
ماكيرما ي تايد لك عيش ناك اديج ماقلتخمو ي تصق ثدحتت ن ع يبراجت قديجلا ي في ماكيرما

دعب ماذاقتنا انمزح انتعتما انعدو وانتلتاء ترعش نزلاب كرتل ي ناقصاً تنك اسمحتم اضيأ تيؤرلا نكاماً ؛ قديج تدرأ فاشكتسا
عاشماً ما اهرأ ن م . لبق تنك لما قايدب لصفاً ي في ماكيرما امدنع تلصو تظحلا ن عيمجلا ثدحتت تيزيلجنلا ما ههفأ ريتكلا ي في ميايدلا
ي تلعب اذه رعشاً لجحلاب فوخلا لايقة تلواحد ا دهاج نأ ملعتاً . تغللا دقو ي ند ملعت تيزيلجنلا ي لاء ثدحتلا عم صاخشاً ددج تادب بهذا
ي لا ا تسردملا فرعتاؤ ي لاء ي تلامن ثبعلا

تضايروا تيرجو تخطشاً قديج تقوذت ما عطلا ي كيرملاً لؤا . قرم تملعتو ن ع دياقت متفلتخم امك تنوك تاقادص قديج ي ندعاس
ي لاء تسرامم تيزيلجنلا دعب قده عيباساً تحبصاً رثكا . متقت تادبو قايدلا حبصت لهسأ تيسنلاب ي ل تنك رثكا قباعس ي ذلاً ترصد ههفأ
رثكا تملعت نأ لاقتنلا ي لا ا لبل ديدج رما

ABDERRAHMENE AZIZ, GRADE 10

Echelon

Three rambunctious hooligans sat around in a circle in a colorful room filled with vibrant sunshine, staring at a peculiar yet whimsical contraption of wonders. One picks up the contraption, as it creates a mesmerizing sound which pulls in the attention of all three with an iron grip. The one holding the cube-like contraption begins to poke at it, bringing about a sensation of malleable metal without any warmth, and sounds of dazzling frequencies more intricate than the stars in the night sky. The three stared transfixed at the new experiences spewed into their world, flowing such as a river straight through their eyes and ears into their mind.

Time passes, and the three have made a small podium of soil to display the glory of the contraption and its wonders in its entirety. Each taking turns going up to interact with it, now striking the contraption to create even more wondrous experiences. Grandeur light shows shoot from its pores, enchanting music emanates from its core, its texture now resembles silk while being as elastic as jelly. The contraption whirls the wind, twists the sunlight, and shapes the ground, yet the three are still not satisfied, wishing for more. Pushing the contraption to create more despite its pleas, its pristine material and condition now faltering with each hit.

The three continue in their indulgence of the contraption, making it create whimsical experiences and dazzling images of grandeur. The contraption toils along as a faint layer of smoke encompasses the room, with its churning gears creating a light grating sound that lies underneath all the spectacular bobs and whistles it produces. Eyes of the contraption escape its outer shell through the worn-down paint, as it's then bound to watch its undoing slowly, with their only hope being not the sunshine, but the unmoving eyes watching the three from above. Through a thin layer of glass, they watch, as they stare and stare, doing nothing more.

Days, weeks, months, years. How long must the contraption watch its death unfold right before its eyes, as it continues to stare up at their last hope that looks back down at it with uncaring eyes as if it had envied the contraption? The contraption didn't understand; it was made for joy and whimsy, to keep the smiles of life bright, and protect all that is beautiful. Although now it isn't even a shell of itself, nor has anything changed by malice, instead it resides within the only life it will know for the coming times. The life of an object.

CHUNG BAC, GRADE 12

I Fell into a Well

My name is Estefani Barrales, and I want to tell you the story of when I fell into a well. It was a day when my father took my sisters and me to play basketball. I was about 9 or 10 years old, and this is what I remember of that embarrassing situation.

It was a sunny day, and we were in a park. The park was very big; it had soccer and basketball courts, and there was a playground where we were. Nearby was a well, which we approached (it didn't have any railings to prevent people from falling in). Inside the well was a very ugly fish, but I liked it because it had long whiskers. I was very happy watching that animal.

After seeing the fish, my sisters said they wanted to play basketball, especially a game they really liked at the time called "The Clock." It consists of shooting hoops clockwise, and whoever gets the most baskets wins. My sisters went off with my dad, and I, wanting to keep watching the fish because it was so pretty, stayed in the well.

Like a child, being too close wasn't enough for me; I got too close, slipped, and fell in, getting my clothes wet. My instinct was to grab onto a poorly driven stake and some weeds. While this was happening, I was screaming like crazy because I was so nervous. I knew there was a fish, but now I was afraid it might bite me. While I was screaming, a man who was nearby came over and helped me. Once we were out, because of the commotion, many people started to gather to see what had happened, including my father and my sisters, who thanked the man. The man left, and the people dispersed.

After what happened, I ran to my mother's work. I arrived and stood outside crying. My mother saw me and told me to go inside while she talked to my sisters and my father to find out what had happened. When I got home, I showered and changed. Then my mother arrived and brought me a cake to eat, so I could calm down. And it did.

After this strange experience, I learned that I need to be more careful when I'm in places that can be dangerous, and that thanks to me, the city installed safety railings. So, my ordeal and the incident itself helped prevent future accidents.

Me caí en un pozo

Mi nombre es Estefani Barrales y quiero contarles la historia de cuando me caí en un pozo. Fue un día en el que mi padre nos llevó a jugar baloncesto junto con mis hermanas. Tendría yo unos 9 o 10 años y esto es lo que recuerdo de aquella situación bochornosa.

Era un día soleado y estábamos en un parque, el parque era muy grande, tenía canchas de fútbol y basquetbol y había una zona de juegos en donde nos encontrábamos y cerca de ahí había un pozo al cual nos acercamos (este no tenía varillas para evitar el paso). Dentro del pozo había un pez muy feo, pero a mí me gustaba porque tenía unos bigotes largos. Estaba muy feliz viendo aquel animal.

Luego de ver el pez, mis hermanas dijeron que querían jugar basquetbol en especial un juego que para ese entonces les gustaba mucho, se llamaba El Reloj, que consiste en hacer lanzamientos siguiendo las manecillas del reloj y quien logra más canastas, gana. Mis hermanas se fueron con mi papá y yo que quería seguir viendo el pez porque estaba muy bonito y me quedé en el pozo.

Como vil infante no me bastó ya estar demasiado cerca, me aproximé de más y resbalé y caí dentro, mojándome la ropa. Mi instinto fue agarrarme de una varilla mal clavada y de unas hierbas, mientras esto ocurría yo estaba gritando como loca pues me puse más nerviosa, sabía que había un pez, pero ahora tenía miedo ya que pensaba que él me podía morder. Mientras gritaba, un hombre que estaba por ahí se acercó y me ayudó, ya estando afuera, por el alboroto mucha gente se empezó a acercar a ver qué había pasado, entre ellos mi padre y mis hermanas, quienes le dieron las gracias al señor. El señor se fue y la gente se dispersó.

Después de lo que sucedió, me fui corriendo al trabajo de mi madre, llegué y me quedé afuera llorando y mi mamá me vio y me dijo que me fuera a la casa mientras hablaba con mis hermanas y mi padre para saber qué fue lo que pasó. Llegando a casa, me bañé y me cambié, después llegó mi madre y me llevó una torta para que comiera y pudiera tranquilizarme. Y así fue.

Luego de esta extraña experiencia aprendí que debo ser más cuidadosa cuando estoy en lugares que pueden ser peligrosos y que gracias a mí, la ciudad instaló varillas de protección, así que mi pena y acontecimiento sirvió para evitar futuros accidentes

ESTEFANI BARRALES, GRADE 10

In My Home

In my home, I hear laughter, footsteps in the hallway,
We heard laughter, the radio playing, and the clinking of cups.
The rich smell of chocolate cake.
A meeting of the food and of the souls.
We talk about the things that happen during the day.

We feel light and full of love.
In my house, I feel safe.
I have my family who takes care of me.
How lucky it is to have my family to take care of me and to love me.
How lucky I am.

En mi hogar

En mi hogar escucho las risas, los pasos en el pasillo,
Se escuchan las risas, la radio que suena, el tintineo de tazas.
El olor rico del pastel de chocolate
Una reunión de comida y almas.
Hablamos sobre las cosas que nos pasan en el día.

Nos sentimos leves y llenos de amor.
En mi hogar me siento segura.
Tengo a mi familia que me cuida
Qué suerte es tener a mi familia que me cuide y me ame.
¡Qué suerte tengo yo!

MARIA FERNANDA CARPIO, GRADE 10

The Time I Spent Eating Avocados for a Week

I'm Joshua Castellano, a boy from Yaracuy state, Venezuela. My story happened when I was eight or nine years old. I'll tell you about the time I ate nothing but avocados for a week.

It all started because my grandfather told me that my mother hadn't received her salary and his pension hadn't been paid yet; food was scarce, and we had to figure out how to feed ourselves. At that time, I lived with my grandfather and my brother; I was very carefree and didn't pay any attention.

Then my grandfather started going to the mountains to bring back avocados and other fruits, but when he saw that a lot of food was going to be wasted because no one was picking it, he brought back more. It was avocado season, so that's what my grandfather brought home most often.

My grandfather and I ate avocado in all sorts of ways: avocado with bread, avocado with arepas, avocado with bollito (a boiled corn dough ball), or just plain avocado. But for a while, I would sometimes throw it up because after eating so much, my stomach just didn't want it anymore. But I kept eating it because there wasn't much else to choose from. Those were days when we simply tried to enjoy what we had, and we didn't feel sad or frustrated; we knew better times were coming.

After that week of basically eating nothing but avocados, my grandfather finally received his pension, and the first thing he did was buy chicken. It was the most anticipated chicken of my life, and it tasted delicious. A while later, my grandfather started bringing home yucca plants for us to grow in the yard. Some of the plants were stolen when we weren't home, so I just had to plant new ones and keep an eye on them. This was in case the pension was delayed again, and at least we'd have some variety between avocados and yucca.

After this experience, I learned that something as simple as an avocado can save your life. You must value everything you have, and I also learned that planting can sometimes be difficult, but with time and dedication, that little plant can help you in critical moments. So, I started thinking about a new future using my new knowledge. In the end, I felt exhausted from planting under the sun, but it only made me stronger.



El tiempo que duré una semana comiendo aguacate

Soy Joshua Castellano, un chico de Venezuela, estado de Yaracuy. Mi historia ocurrió cuando tenía ocho o nueve años. A continuación, les contaré sobre mi historia la vez que duré una semana comiendo sólo aguacate.

Todo comenzó porque mi abuelo me contó que mi mamá no había cobrado su sueldo y la pensión de él aún no se le había pagado, la comida estaba escasa y debíamos solucionar nuestra alimentación. En esos tiempos yo vivía con mi abuelo y mi hermano, yo era muy despreocupado y no le presté atención.

Luego mi abuelo empezó a ir al monte donde él trabajaba para traer aguacates y demás frutas, pero cuando vio que mucha comida se perdía porque nadie la recogía, él empezó a traer más. La temporada en la que estábamos era de aguacates, por lo tanto, era lo que más traía mi abuelo a casa.

Mi abuelo y yo comíamos aguacate de formas variadas, sea aguacate con pan, aguacate con arepas, aguacate con bollito (bola de masa de maíz que se hierve) o aguacate puro. Pero por un tiempo a veces lo vomitaba, porque al comerlo tanto, ya mi estómago no lo quería más. Pero aun así comía porque no había mucho más de dónde escoger. Fueron días en los que simplemente intentamos disfrutar lo que había y no nos sentimos tristes ni frustrados, sabíamos que mejores tiempos llegarían.

Luego de esa semana alimentándonos básicamente solo con aguacate, al fin le pagaron la pensión a mi abuelo, y lo primero que hizo fue comprar pollo, ha sido el pollo más esperado de mi vida y me supo delicioso. Un tiempo después mi abuelo empezó a traer plantas de yuca para que sembramos en el patio, algunas yucas se las robaban cuando nosotros no estábamos en casa por lo que solamente me tocó plantar nuevas yucas y estar vigilando las. Esto en caso de que se demorara nuevamente la pensión, y al menos variaríamos entre aguacate y yuca.

Luego de esta experiencia supe que un alimento tan sencillo como el aguacate te puede salvar la vida, hay que valorar todo lo que se tiene y también aprendí que a veces plantar puede ser difícil, pero con tiempo y

dedicación esa pequeña planta te puede ayudar en momentos críticos, por lo que empecé a pensar en un futuro nuevo con mis conocimientos. Al final me sentí exhausto por el cansancio de sembrar bajo el sol, pero solo me ayudó a ser más fuerte.

JOSHUA CASTELLANOS, GRADE 9

The Most Important Decision of My Life

Hello, my name is Alejandro, I'm Salvadorian, and today I'll be talking about how I managed to be here in the United States. I was 13 years old when I went through this experience (last year). It was painful to leave my country, and even so, I managed to make progress despite how difficult the process became.

My visa was approved around October 2023, something that made my parents very happy, as they had already traveled to the United States and wanted me to see how beautiful the country is. This happened around March 2024 when we were returning to El Salvador, my aunt and uncle had been asking my parents for us to stay in the country because they wanted what was best not only for my parents but for me as well, therefore, in the middle of the year my parents made the difficult decision to travel (emigrate) to the United States because upon arrival we would have a home and people who would support us in settling in the country.

The last few weeks were the most difficult because not only I had family but also people who had been very important to me and I didn't want to leave my grandparents, uncles, and my cousin who's like a brother to me, but then I noticed that this was the best decision we could have made, it was a guaranteed future for my family and for me, although that didn't stop me from breaking down and crying at the airport. I felt like time was moving very slowly, and I felt horrible. Even though I knew that our life was going to change, my parents knew that it was really painful. Even so, we weren't going to back down and decided to continue with our "plan". Upon arriving in the country, I felt relieved because I knew that a new me was the one that arrived here, a version of me that would fight for our future, not only for our family of three, but also for the ones that we left behind and the reason why I am who I am today.

Although the first few months were difficult, my parents managed to get jobs, but I didn't start school. Why? My parents were afraid because, given the sensitive issues that were occurring, they didn't want me to "take risks." Luckily, I started school in August of this year, and I've met incredible people, friends, and teachers through whom I have come to realize how beautiful this country is and what I can achieve with effort and dedication.

I've changed a lot and I don't regret it, I have shown my best version and I know that I can achieve more with the support of those people I have met and my greatest motivation is to achieve a future not only for my parents but for my family, those beautiful people who have marked me as a person and I know that everything I set out to do I can achieve with their support.

La decisión más importante de mi vida

Hola, mi nombre es Alejandro, soy salvadoreño y en esta ocasión les hablaré acerca de cómo llegué aquí a los Estados Unidos, yo tenía 13 años cuando pasé por esto, fue doloroso abandonar mi país y aún así he logrado progresar a pesar de lo difícil que llegó a ser el proceso.

Alrededor de octubre del 2023 me aprobaron la Visa, algo que alegró mucho a mis padres ya que ellos ya habían viajado y querían que yo pudiera ver lo lindo de los Estados Unidos. El asunto ocurrió por marzo del 2024 cuando estábamos por regresar a El Salvador, mis tíos llevaban meses pidiendo a mis padres que nos quedáramos en el país ya que ellos deseaban lo mejor no solamente para mis padres si no que para mí también, por lo tanto, a mediados de año mis padres tomaron la difícil decisión de viajar (emigrar) a los Estados Unidos ya que al llegar tendríamos un hogar y gente que nos apoyara a establecernos en el país.

Las últimas semanas fueron las más difíciles ya que no solamente tenía familia sino que tenía personas las cuales habían sido importantes para mí y que yo no quería abandonar como a mis abuelos, mis tíos o a mi

primo el cual he considerado como un hermano, pero me di cuenta de que esa era la mejor decisión, era un futuro asegurado para mi familia y para mí, aunque eso no evitó que me derrumbara y llorara en el aeropuerto. Allí sentí que el tiempo no avanzaba, estaba desesperado y me sentía fatal y aunque supiera que nuestra vida iba a cambiar, mis padres sabían que en el fondo era muy doloroso, aun así, no íbamos a retroceder y seguimos con nuestro “plan”. Al llegar al país me sentí aliviado ya que me di cuenta de que había llegado un nuevo yo, una versión de mí la cual lucharía por el futuro no sólo de nosotros tres como familia, sino que también por la familia la cual dejamos allí y por quienes debo agradecer muchas cosas en mi vida.

Aunque los primeros meses fueron difíciles, mis padres lograron conseguir trabajo, pero yo no había empezado la escuela, ¿Por qué? Mis padres tenían miedo ya que con los temas tan delicados que estaban ocurriendo estos últimos meses no querían que yo me “arriesgara”, por suerte en el mes de agosto de este año empecé la escuela y he conocido a personas increíbles, amigos y maestros por igual, los cuales me han mostrado lo hermoso que puede no solamente llegar a ser el país, sino que me han mostrado lo lejos que puedo llegar y lo que puedo lograr con esfuerzo y motivación.

He cambiado en muchos aspectos y la verdad no me arrepiento, he mostrado mi mejor versión y sé que puedo lograr más con el apoyo de esas personas que he conocido y mi mayor motivación es lograr un futuro no solamente para mis padres sino para mi familia, a esa gente tan hermosa que me ha marcado como persona y sé que todo lo que me proponga lo puedo lograr con el apoyo de ellos.

ALEJANDRO CHAVEZ, GRADE 9

Where We Once Were, but No Longer Are

Once, that place shone
with a light so familiar
that my steps found comfort
just by seeing it from afar.
But today I look at it,
and everything has turned to shadows
that no longer speak my name
nor recognize the girl
I used to be there.
The air has lost
that warm scent of once,
and now
only an empty wind remains,
one that embraces no one.
The voices
that once filled my nights
have also gone quiet.
They left like an echo
that no longer knows
how to return.
The warmth
that once made me feel
part of something
has now become a cold

that sits still
between my hands.
Even the taste
of its memories have changed;
what was once sweet
now leaves
a bitterness
I cannot swallow.
I return to its corners
like someone stepping
into an empty house,
knowing nothing fits anymore
and nothing can be
as it was.
And as I walk,
I understand
that the place I loved so dearly
has ceased to be mine,
even though part of me
keeps searching for it.
All that remains
are the ashes
of who I was there,
remnants of a light
that went out without warning
and never lit again.
That place stopped
being my refuge,
because now I know
my only home is myself
in every place I go
and every place
where I belong.

Donde un día fuimos, pero ya no somos

Antes, ese lugar brillaba
con una luz tan familiar
que mis pasos encontraban consuelo
solo con verlo a lo lejos.
Pero hoy lo miro
y todo se ha vuelto sombras
que ya no pronuncian mi nombre
ni reconocen
a la niña que fui allí.

El aire perdió
ese olor cálido
que alguna vez me sostuvo,
y ahora solo queda
un viento vacío
que no abraza a nadie.
También se apagaron
las voces
que llenaban mis noches;
se fueron como un eco
que ya no sabe
regresar.
El calor
que un día me hizo sentir
parte de algo
ahora se convirtió
en un frío
que se queda quieto
entre mis manos.
Incluso el sabor
de sus recuerdos cambió,
porque lo que antes era dulce
ahora deja un amargo
que no logro tragar.
Vuelvo a sus rincones
como quien entra
a una casa vacía,
sabiendo que nada encaja
y que nada vuelve
a ser como era.
Y mientras camino,
entiendo
que ese lugar
que tanto amé
ha dejado de ser mío,
aunque una parte de mí
siga buscándolo.
Me quedan solo cenizas
de lo que fui ahí,
restos de una luz
que se apagó sin aviso
y que nunca volvió
a encender.
Ese lugar dejó
de ser mi refugio,

porque ahora sé
que mi único hogar
soy yo misma,
en cada sitio al que voy
y en cada sitio
donde pertenezco.

MARIA CISNEROS, GRADE II

How I Changed Countries

Hi, my name is Mirian. I'm 16 years old, and I'm from Guatemala. My favorite foods are enchiladas and carnitas, and my favorite drinks are piña coladas and lemonade. I'll tell you about my last day in my country; it was a little strange, but also beautiful. It was a mix of emotions because at that time, they were preparing for my 15th birthday party. It was a day I was at school, and at that moment I felt very happy and sad at the same time because my mom wanted to come to the United States and I had to leave my friends, my school, and everything, like my kitten, all my belongings, as well as my grandmother.

How did I get here? It all started when my mom told me they were organizing trips here to the USA. At that time, since I was about to turn 15, they already had my dress, they were making it, and other things, like a motorcycle, they were going to give me for my birthday.

But since I didn't want it or the party, I decided to use that money to come to the United States with my mom and my siblings. I felt great because I was going to see another country. The first few days in the USA were terrible; they were really awful days for me. At that moment, I wanted to go back to my country. I cried. I missed my grandmother so much because I thought, how would my days be without her, without a hug, without talking to her in person, without my friends from home, without being able to talk to them, and without my cat. I continued to feel unwell, but I tried to move forward, although even now, 11 months later, I still want to go back.

My arrival in the United States was wonderful. They were very affectionate, very, very kind, very friendly to my family. As soon as we entered the USA, it was a happy day. I felt joyful, even though we were very tired from so much walking, running from the border patrol, going through the forest, sleeping in the rain, hardly eating anything, being turned back, being taken off the bus, and everything else. But thank God we arrived here safely, and we were happy.

After the journey that I was going to the USA, I learned that the suffering and sacrifices I have made to get here can be rewarded with a better future and, above all, fulfilling my biggest goal of bringing my grandmother to live with me, since she is like a second mother to me.

Cómo cambié de país

Hola, me llamo Mirian. tengo 16 años soy de Guatemala, mi comida favorita son las enchiladas y las carnitas y mi bebida favorita es la piña colada y de limón, les contaré como fue mi último día en mi país, fue algo raro, pero a la vez bonito.

Fue una mezcla de emociones porque en ese tiempo estaban haciendo los preparativos de mi fiesta de 15 años, fue un día que yo estaba en la escuela, en ese momento me sentí muy feliz y triste a la vez porque mi mamá en ese momento se quería venir para los Estados Unidos y tenía que dejar a mis amigos, mi escuela y todo, como mi gatito, todas mis pertenencias, al igual que a mi abuela.

¿Cómo llegué aquí? Todo comenzó cuando mi mamá me dijo que estaban haciendo viajes para acá a USA, en ese entonces como yo iba a tener mis 15 años, en ese momento ya tenían mi vestido, lo estaban confeccionando y otras cosas, como una motocicleta que me iban a regalar para mi cumpleaños. Pero como no la quería ni

la fiesta decidí usar ese dinero para venir a Estados Unidos con mi mamá y mis hermanos, me sentí muy bien porque iba a conocer otro país. Los primeros días en USA fueron terribles, fueron unos días muy feos para mí, en ese momento me quería ir para mi país de regreso, yo lloré, extrañaba mucho a mi abuela porque dije cómo van mis días sin ella, sin un abrazo y sin nada de hablar en persona, mis amistades de mi país, sin poder hablar con ellos y mi gatito. Luego seguir sintiéndome no tan bien, pero sí trataba de salir adelante, aunque hoy en día, 11 meses después, aún me quiero regresar.

Mi llegada a los Estado Unidos fue muy linda, fueron muy cariñosos, muy pero muy amables, muy amigables conmigo y mi familia, tan pronto entramos a USA fue un día feliz, me sentí alegre, bueno, aunque veníamos muy cansados de tanto caminar, correr de la patrulla fronteriza, pasar por el bosque, dormir debajo de la lluvia, no comer casi nada, que nos regresaran, que nos bajaran del bus y todo, pero gracias a Dios llegamos bien aquí y estábamos felices.

Luego de la travesía que fue llegar a USA, aprendí que lo sufrido y los sacrificios que he hecho por entrar aquí, pueden tener una recompensa en tener un futuro mejor y sobre todo, cumplir mi meta más grande de traer a mi abuela a vivir junto a mí, ya que ella es como mi segunda madre.

MIRIAN CONTRERAS, GRADE 10

My Story

Hello, my name is Angel David. I am currently in the United States. This happened three years ago. My story is about how I came to the United States from my country, Guatemala.

When I left, I said goodbye to everyone. I didn't look back because I was sad to be leaving my home for so long, but oh well, it will always be my home forever.

When I came alone, I didn't know anyone, but I made quite a few friends along the way. When I first arrived at school, I was very nervous. On the first day, I couldn't find some of my classes, but on the second day, everything was easy. I saw many new things and made friends quickly.

On the first day of school, I finally got home, and the first day of school was over. The first thing I did after leaving school was go and eat everything I could find there.

And well, I made a lot of friends at the end of school. We used to live in the same area, and I'm still friends with them, but we don't live close by anymore. The first day went well.

The next day, I started looking for my new classes. The second day was easier than the first, to be honest.

Well, I learned a lot. I felt normal because I used to change schools a lot, so the only problem was the language, which was different, and those complicated things for me.

Mi historia

Hola, mi nombre es Angel David, ahora mismo estoy en Estados Unidos, mi historia es de cómo llegué aquí desde mi país Guatemala hace tres años.

Me despedí de todos, no miré atrás y me fui de allí. No miré atrás por la tristeza de dejar mi hogar durante mucho tiempo, pero bueno, ese será mi hogar para siempre.

Cuando llegué, estaba muy nervioso; el primer día no encontré algunas clases, pero el segundo día todo fue fácil. Vi muchas cosas nuevas e hice amigos rápidamente. El primer día de clases, por fin llegué a casa y el primer día de clases terminó. Lo primero que hice después de salir del colegio fue ir a comerme todo lo que había.

Hice un montón de amigos al final de escuela, vivíamos en la misma zona en ese tiempo, aún tengo su amistad, pero ya no vivimos cerca, el primer día de escuela fue muy bueno y al día siguiente empecé a buscar mis nuevas clases, el segundo día fue más fácil que el primero la verdad.

Bueno, aprendí muchas cosas. Me sentí normal porque solía cambiar mucho de escuela, así que el único problema era el idioma, que era diferente, y eso me complicó las cosas.

ANGEL CORADO, GRADE 9

My Family and I

Hi, my name is Alex Cruz, I'm 15 years old, and my story is about when we went to El Salvador in 2021. It was a wonderful family trip.

I was living in Honduras, and one day we went to El Salvador. It was around eight or nine in the morning when we left, and we had about an eleven-hour drive ahead of us. My dad was driving, and I forgot to put my suitcase and my dad's suitcase in the car, so they stayed at home. When we arrived in San Miguel, El Salvador, my dad scolded me for forgetting the most important thing on a trip.

We went to my paternal grandmother's house. The next day, we went shopping for clothes, but because of my forgetfulness, we didn't have anything to wear. After that unexpected shopping, we went to eat pupusas and returned to my grandmother's house.

In the following days, we went to the beach together: my mom, my dad, my grandmother, and some cousins we picked up along the way. We enjoyed the sea, swam, and laughed a lot. We had a delicious barbecue and shared stories and moments I'll always remember. After a week in that country, we returned home, and our suitcases were still waiting for us.

Thanks to that trip, I know that family time should always be cherished, and even when unexpected things happen, we should maintain a positive attitude and enjoy what we have and experience.

Mi familia y yo

Hola, mi nombre es Alex Cruz, tengo 15 años, mi historia se trata de cuando fuimos a El Salvador en el año 2021, fue un hermoso viaje familiar.

Yo vivía en Honduras y un día fuimos a El Salvador, eran como las ocho o nueve de la mañana cuando partimos y teníamos como once horas de camino en carro por delante. Mi papá tenía que manejar, y yo olvidé subir mi maleta y la de mi papá al carro, así que se quedaron en casa, cuando llegamos a San Miguel, en El Salvador, mi papá me regañó porque había olvidado lo más importante en un viaje.

Fuimos a la casa de mi abuela paterna, al día siguiente fuimos a comprar ropa, ya que por mi olvido, no teníamos nada que vestir. Luego de ese plan de compras inesperado fuimos a comer unas pupusas y regresamos a la casa de mi abuela.

En los días siguientes fuimos a la playa, todos juntos, mi mamá, mi papá, mi abuela y unos primos que recogimos en el camino a la playa. Disfrutamos del mar, nadamos y reímos mucho, hicimos un BBQ que estuvo delicioso y compartimos historias y momentos que recordaré siempre. Luego de una semana en ese país, regresamos al nuestro y en casa, las maletas aún nos estaban esperando.

Gracias a ese viaje, sé que los momentos en familia hay que siempre valorarlos y aunque pasen cosas inesperadas, debemos poner la mejor actitud y disfrutar de lo que se tiene y se vive.

ALEX CRUZ, GRADE 10

A Passion for Animals

My name is Dayana Cubas. I'm from Honduras, but I moved to the United States with my mom. My story is about my passion for animals. Since I was little, I've loved animals like rabbits, parakeets, cats, dolphins, turtles, and many more, but I especially love dogs because they're beautiful. I've loved them since I was little, and one day I was walking, feeling sad, and suddenly I came across a dog.

He was abandoned and very dirty, but I picked him up and took him home. When I got there, the first thing I did was bathe him. I cleaned him up and gave him food. The little dog was very hungry. Then I started playing with him and had a lot of fun. That dog turned my sadness into joy. Later, I thought about what to name him because he didn't have a name yet, and I thought about it a lot, but I decided to call him "Toby." I liked that name. He was brown and very cute, and in just a few hours, I grew so attached to him that I ended up falling asleep next to Toby.

When I woke up, I asked my mom if we could keep him, and she said no for many reasons. I got very sad and said, but where is he going to go if he has nowhere and no one to go with? And she said you're right, but since he can't stay here, we'll take him to an animal shelter so they can put him up for adoption and I assure you that someone will come along who will adopt him and take very good care of him.

With tears in my eyes, I agreed. Then three years passed without me seeing Toby, and I went back to where we had left him. He had already been adopted. I asked if I could contact the people who adopted him, and they said they would ask them first. When they called, they said yes, and I was so excited. I asked if I could visit him, and they agreed. When I saw him again, he was so big, and it seemed he recognized me. I hugged him and started playing with him. I visited him often, and they told me they had taken him to the vet, who said Toby had an illness and didn't have much time left. Hearing that news broke my heart into a thousand pieces. I was so sad, and I wanted to spend the little time he had left with him.

After three months, the vet said his illness had progressed, and he only had one week to live. I was even sadder, and I hugged Toby tightly, tears streaming down my face. The last day arrived, and no one imagined it would be his last, but Toby wanted to say goodbye. Then he closed his eyes, and I cried so much beside him, wishing it were all just a nightmare. Toby passed away, and it was so sad. Afterward, I visited his grave often, but because he had brought us so much joy, I just told him how much I missed him and reminisced about all the beautiful moments we shared from the day I met him until his last day. And that's how the story of our beloved Toby came to an end.

La Pasión por los animales

Yo soy Dayana Cubas, soy de Honduras, pero me mude a Estados Unidos con mi mamá. Mi historia trata de La Pasión Por Los Animales. Desde que yo estaba pequeña me gustaban mucho los animales como los conejos, los pericos, los gatos, los delfines, las tortugas, y muchos más, pero en especialmente me gustan los perros porque son bonitos y desde pequeña me han gustado mucho y una vez que yo iba caminando, iba triste y de repente me encontré un perro.

Estaba abandonado y muy sucio, pero yo lo recogí y lo llevé a mi casa, cuando llegué lo primero que hice fue bañarlo, lo dejé limpio y le di comida, el perrito tenía mucha hambre, después me puse a jugar con él y me divertí mucho, ese perro hizo que mi tristeza se convirtiera en alegría. Luego pensé en cómo llamarlo porque aún no tenía un nombre y pensé mucho, pero decidí llamarlo "TOBY" me gustó ese nombre, era color café era bien bonito y en pocas horas me encariñé tanto con él, al final me dormí junto con Toby.

Cuando desperté le pregunté a mi mamá que, si nos lo podíamos quedar y ella me dijo que no por muchas razones, y entonces yo me puse muy triste y le dije, ¿pero a dónde se va a ir si no tiene dónde ni con quien ir? Y ella me dijo tienes razón, pero como no se puede quedar aquí lo llevaremos a un refugio de animales para que lo pongan en adopción y te aseguro que llegará alguien que lo adopte y lo cuide muy bien.

Con lágrimas en mis ojos acepté, luego pasaron 3 años sin mirar a Toby y fui a donde lo dejamos y ya lo habían adoptado, pregunté si podía comunicarme con las personas que lo adoptaron, me dijeron que les preguntarían a ellos primero y cuando les llamaron ellos dijeron que sí, y me emocioné tanto. Pregunté si podía ir a visitarlo y accedieron y cuando lo vi de nuevo estaba muy grande y al parecer el me reconoció, lo abracé y me

puse a jugar con él, lo estuve visitando seguido y me dijeron que lo habían llevado al veterinario y les habían dicho que Toby tenía una enfermedad y que le quedaba poco tiempo de vida. Al escuchar esa noticia se me rompió el corazón en mil pedazos, me puse muy triste y quise pasar el poco tiempo que le quedaba con él.

Después de 3 meses el veterinario dijo que la enfermedad se le avanzó y que solo le queda 1 semana de vida, me entristecí más y abracé fuerte a Toby y mis lágrimas solo salían, llegó el último día y nadie imaginó que ese sería su último día, pero Toby se quiso como despedir, después él cerró sus ojos y lloré tanto a su lado que solo deseaba que ojalá fuera una pesadilla. Toby falleció y fue muy triste, después lo iba a visitar seguido a su tumba, pero como él nos dio alegría solo le dije cuánto lo extrañaba y me puse a recordar todos los momentos bonitos que pasamos desde que lo conocí hasta su último día y así terminó el final del adorado TOBY.

DAYANA CUBAS, GRADE 10

My First Surgery

My name is Erick, and I want to tell you about my first surgery. It was when I was two years old and living in my home country of Honduras.

It all started one morning when I was playing with my cousin with stick horses, and my uncle was bringing his real horse to saddle it. While they were putting the saddle on the horse, it started jumping and broke free from the rope and went straight toward us. My cousin took cover behind a car that was there, and the horse charged straight at me and trampled me with its front hooves.

My parents picked me up, and my uncle ran to get a car. They rushed me to the hospital, where I was admitted as an emergency patient. The blow was to my left lung. They operated on me, and my parents were very worried, but in the end, after some time in surgery, the operation went well.

My recovery was a success. My family visited me while I was in the hospital, and a few days later, I was discharged. I returned home, and despite the accident I had with the horse, I was never afraid of them; on the contrary, I like them very much.

After what happened to me, I didn't cling to being afraid of horses, but when I have children, and they are around animals, I will be careful so that the same thing doesn't happen to them as happened to me.

Mi primera operación

Mi nombre es Erick y les quiero contar cuando me hicieron mi primera operación. Fue cuando tenía 2 años y vivía en mi país de origen Honduras.

Todo empieza en la mañana que estaba jugando con mi primo con caballos de madera y mi tío llevaba su caballo verdadero para ponerle la silla de montar, cuando le están poniendo la silla al caballo, este empezó a brincar y se soltó de la cuerda y se fue directo hacia donde estábamos nosotros, mi primo se protegió en un carro que estaba en ese lugar y el caballo se fue directo en mi dirección y me arrolló llevándome con sus patas delanteras.

Mis padres me recogieron y mi tío fue corriendo a traer un carro, me llevaron rápido al hospital y allí me internaron de emergencia y el golpe lo llevaba en el pulmón izquierdo, me operaron, mis padres estaban muy preocupados, pero al final, luego de un tiempo en cirugía la operación salió bien.

Mi recuperación fue un éxito mis familiares me fueron a visitar mientras estuve en el hospital y días después me dieron la salida del hospital, regresé de nuevo a mi casa y a pesar del accidente que tuve con el caballo nunca les tuve miedo, al contrario, me gustan mucho.

Después de eso que me pasó no me aferré a tenerle miedo a los caballos, pero cuando tenga a mis hijos y ellos estén cerca de animales les tendré cuidado para que no les pase lo mismo que a mí.

ERICK DIAZ, GRADE 10

When I Came to the United States

Last year, I decided to come to the United States, and I hope to return to Honduras to spend time with my family. I want to reach my goals and succeed with God's help so that I can have the opportunity to go back to my country.

I feel completely different because it's a new life, and I have difficulties with the language and other things. When I enrolled in school, I saw that everything was different, that there are good people and bad people, and there's a bit of everything there.

When you arrive, you have difficulties with the language, and you don't have friends to share your time with. But you must adapt to the loneliness and stay calm. I've been in this nation for a year now, and I'm slowly adjusting. Sometimes I go out with some friends I've made to play soccer, and I have fun at school when I have gym class, where I have some classmates.

I feel different in another country because everything is different; it's like a new life. Despite everything, I feel good being here. I hope to be able to return to my country to see my friends, my schoolmates, and my family.

It's an experience that begins the moment you leave home, and you learn many things. But every effort has its reward, and I feel happy to have arrived in this country, and I hope to have many more opportunities.

Cuando vine a los Estados Unidos

El año pasado decidí venir a Estados Unidos y espero regresar a Honduras para pasar tiempo con mi familia. Quiero alcanzar mis metas y tener éxito con la ayuda de Dios para así tener la oportunidad de volver a mi país.

Me siento completamente diferente porque es una vida nueva y tengo dificultades con el idioma y otras cosas. Cuando me escribieron en la escuela, vi que todo era distinto, que hay gente buena y gente mala, allí se encuentra de todo.

Cuando llegas, tienes dificultades con el idioma, no tienes amigos con quienes compartir tu tiempo. Pero tienes que adaptarte a la soledad y andar todo tranquilo. Ya tengo un año de estar en esta nación y me voy adaptando de a poco, a veces salgo con algunos amigos que he hecho a jugar pelota y me divierto en la escuela cuando tengo la clase de gimnasio donde tengo algunos compañeros.

Me siento diferente en otro país porque todo es distinto; es como una nueva vida. A pesar de todo, me siento bien estando aquí. Espero poder regresar a mi país para ver a mis amigos, compañeros de escuela y mi familia.

Es una experiencia que comienza desde el momento en que sales de casa y aprendes muchas cosas, pero todo esfuerzo tiene su recompensa, y me siento feliz de haber llegado a este país, y espero tener muchas más oportunidades.

BRAYAN JAVIER FUNES, GRADE 10

My First Time in New York

I'm David, and I'll tell you a story that includes a little anecdote from my first trip to New York City last year. I don't remember the exact month, but I do remember it was a Saturday night.

First, I was packing some things in my backpack that afternoon, like sweaters, since we were only going to be in New York for a day, food, and some snacks for the road, because we were going in a van, which is a four-hour drive. It was my cousin, a friend of my cousin's family, and two other friends of his. Once everything was ready, we all got in the van, and the trip began. There were no problems during the trip. When we officially arrived in New York, I was surprised. We arrived around three or four in the morning, so it was early morning, and there was no traffic. I could see the screens, the decorations, because Christmas was so close, and there were more

screens on the buildings. I also noticed some homeless people sleeping on the streets, and that the streets were a little dirtier. But I was surprised by how beautiful everything around me was.

Once we were officially in New York, we were looking for parking at 4:00 AM, and the problem was that we couldn't find any. Most of the parking lots were full. Everywhere we looked, people told us the parking lot was full. My cousin's friend, who was driving, was practically begging them for space since we'd been looking for parking for ages. Another problem was that before the trip, my dad told me to wear a heater and bring sweaters to keep warm because it was twice as cold as back in Virginia. I didn't listen; I didn't bring what I needed because I thought it wouldn't be that cold. Well, when we got to New York, we looked for a McDonald's for breakfast. As soon as I got out of the van, I started feeling incredibly cold. My hands felt like they were freezing; I couldn't even feel them. We walked for about five minutes to get to McDonald's, but it felt like hours. I felt like I was freezing in the wind.

After breakfast, I asked my cousin if he had a sweater in his backpack that fit. Luckily, he did a little big, but it was warm. After that little incident, all that was left was to enjoy New York. As day broke, the streets began to fill with people. We walked around, and I took pictures with my cousin in various places, even in front of a parked Ferrari. Everything looked beautiful. What I liked most were the 3D screens on the streets; they were always lit up. I recorded videos of them. I had a great time with my cousin and his friends. It was a wonderful experience being in New York.

Well, what I learned from the trip is that, even if I don't want to, I have to listen to my dad's advice. He told me to bring sweaters because of the cold. It stuck with me when I was freezing, thinking, "My dad was right." So, it's good to listen to advice, even if we think we're right.

Mi primera vez en New York

Soy David, contaré una historia que incluye una pequeña anécdota de cuando fui por primera vez a New York por paseo, fue el año pasado, no recuerdo exactamente el mes, pero sí que fue un sábado en la noche.

Lo que pasó primero fue que en la tarde estaba ordenando algunas cosas en mi mochila, como suéteres, ya que solo íbamos a estar un día en New York, comida, algunos snacks para el camino, porque fuimos en una van, que en carro son 4 horas de viaje. Fue mi primo, una familia de un amigo de mi primo y otros dos amigos más de él. Ya todo listo, todos entramos en la van, y empezó el viaje. Durante el viaje no hubo ningún inconveniente. Cuando oficialmente llegamos a New York, me sentí sorprendido, habíamos llegado a las cuatro o tres de la mañana, por lo cual era madrugada y no había tráfico. Pude observar las pantallas, las decoraciones por lo cerca que estaba la Navidad, más pantallas en los edificios, también me di cuenta de que había algunos vagabundos en las calles, durmiendo, y que las calles estaban un poco más sucias. Pero me sorprendió lo bonito que estaba a mi alrededor.

Ya estando oficialmente en New York, buscábamos un estacionamiento a las 4 de la mañana, y el problema era que no encontrábamos, la mayoría estaban llenos, donde íbamos a buscar, las personas nos decían que estaba lleno el estacionamiento, el amigo de mi primo, el que conducía, les rogaba por un espacio ya que llevábamos muchos minutos buscando estacionamiento. Otro problema fue que, antes del viaje, mi papá me decía que me ponga calentador y que lleve suéteres, para abrigarme porque hacía el doble de frío que aquí en VA. Yo no hice caso, no llevé lo necesario porque pensé que no haría tanto frío. Pues cuando llegamos a New York, buscamos un McDonald's para desayunar, apenas salí de la van, empecé a tener demasiado frío, sentía que se me congelaban las manos, ni las sentía. Caminamos como 5 minutos para llegar al McDonald's, que los sentía horas, sentía que me congelaba con el viento.

Ya luego de desayunar, le dije a mi primo que si tenía un suéter que le quedaba en su mochila, por suerte sí tenía uno, un poco grande, pero sí calentaba. Después de ese pequeño incidente ya solo quedaba disfrutar de New York. Ya de día, las calles se empezaban a llenar de gente, caminábamos en varios lugares, me tomaba

fotos en varios lugares con mi primo, hasta en un Ferrari que estaba parqueado. Todo se vio bonito, lo que más me gustó fue las pantallas 3D en las calles, siempre estaban iluminadas, grababa videos de ello, me lo pasé muy bien con mi primo y sus amigos, fue una experiencia muy bonita estar en New York.

Bueno, lo que aprendí del viaje es que, aunque no quiera, tengo que escuchar el consejo de mi padre, por algo me dijo que llevara suéteres por el frío. Se me quedó grabado, cuando me estaba congelando de frío, “Mi papá tuvo razón”. Así que es bueno escuchar consejos, aunque creamos que tenemos la razón.

DAVID GARAY, GRADE 10

I am Poem

I am intelligent and quiet.
I wonder what it is like to live on an island.
I hear monkeys talking on the island.
I see the monkeys having an important meeting.
I want a house for my mom.
I am intelligent and quiet.

I am intelligent and quiet.
I feel passionate about basketball.
I spend a lot of money in my dreams.
I worry about nothing.
I cry when we lose a game.
I am intelligent and quiet.

I am intelligent and quiet.
I understand basketball makes me happy.
I say God is everything.
I dream of giving everything to my parents.
I try to have a good attitude.
I hope to go back to the Dominican Republic someday.
I am intelligent and quiet.

BRAHYAN GARCIA, GRADE 9

Kitty

My name is Genesis, I'm from Honduras, I'm 15 years old, and I'm going to tell you the story of how I rescued my little cat, Kitty.

Five years ago, I was walking down the street with my mother when I saw a man mistreating a baby kitten. It seemed the kitten lived on the street because the man didn't keep it. My mother and I followed the kitten, and I noticed that one of her little paws was injured. We realized she was a female cat, and she was also very thin. We felt so sorry to see her so small and hurt, because she didn't know how to defend herself. Her eyes showed so much innocence. Seeing her fight between life and death, my mother and I took her to the vet, and when we got there, they told us she probably wouldn't survive because she was so small and thin. But we still had hope that she would live. The vet told us she would need to be hospitalized until she recovered, so my mother and I went back home very sad but hopeful that the little kitten would be okay.

A few days passed, and the vet told us to come see the kitten, who still didn't have a name. When we arrived, he told us that, miraculously, the kitten was stable. They had performed a few procedures on her, and he also told us she still needed many vaccines and vitamins, and that if we took great care of her, she would probably

survive. He said she needed lots of love and a home. The problem was that we couldn't adopt her because I'm allergic to cats, but we didn't want to leave her alone either.

It was a difficult decision because I'm allergic, and taking care of a pet in that condition required patience and a lot of attention. But my parents decided, they decided to adopt her because she needed us. We took her home, bought things for her to play with, and special food since she was still a baby. We took very good care of her, and she got better and grew very quickly. I managed my allergies, and although I rarely petted her, she was very happy and lived a long time. I'm grateful for the day we found her on that street.

In conclusion, life gave me a four-legged being who didn't speak but could say so much with her eyes. I watched her grow and learned so many things, moments I will always carry in my heart. Even though she passed away a few months ago, her love lives on in every photo, every memory, and every smile she left me. And even though I'm allergic to cats, her little pawprint stayed in my life forever.

Kitty

Me llamo Génesis, soy de Honduras, tengo 15 años y les contaré la historia de cómo rescaté a mi gatita Kitty.

Hace cinco años, caminaba normalmente por la calle con mi madre cuando vi a un hombre maltratando a un gatito bebé. Al parecer el gatito vivía en la calle porque ese hombre no se quedó con él, mi madre y yo seguimos al gatito y me di cuenta de que tenía lastimada su patita, nos dimos cuenta de que era una gata y estaba muy delgada también. Nos dio tanta lástima verla así tan pequeña y lastimada, porque ella no sabía cómo defenderse, su mirada nos reflejaba tanta inocencia era tan pequeña al verla luchar entre la vida y la muerte mi madre y yo la llevamos al veterinario y llegando allá nos dijeron que probablemente ella no viviría porque era muy pequeña y estaba muy delgada, pero nosotras teníamos esperanzas de que ella sí viviría. El veterinario nos dijo que tendría que estar internada hasta que se recuperara y pues mi madre y yo regresamos a la casa muy tristes pero con esperanza de que la pequeña gatita iba a estar bien.

Pasaron unos días y el veterinario nos dijo que fuéramos a ver a la gatita, quien aún no tenía un nombre, llegamos y él nos dijo que milagrosamente la gatita estaba estable, le hicieron unas operaciones y también nos dijo que a ella le hacían falta muchas vacunas y vitaminas, que si teníamos el mayor cuidado probablemente iba a resistir, nos dijo que ella necesitaba mucho amor y un hogar, el problema era que nosotras no la podíamos adoptar porque yo soy alérgica a los gatos pero tampoco la queríamos dejar sola.

Bueno era una difícil decisión porque yo soy alérgica y tener una mascota en ese estado se necesitaba paciencia y mucho cuidado, pero mis padres tomaron una decisión y decidieron adoptarla porque ella nos necesitaba, la llevamos a la casa, compramos cosas para que jugara y comida especial ya que todavía era una bebé, la cuidamos mucho y ella mejoró y creció muy rápido, yo controle mis alergias y casi nunca la acariciaba ella, era muy feliz y vivió mucho tiempo y agradezco el día que la encontramos en esa calle.

La conclusión es que al final la vida me regaló un ser de cuatro patas que no hablaba, pero con su mirada decía tantas cosas, la vi crecer y aprender tantas cosas, momentos que siempre llevaré en el corazón, aunque ella partió hace unos meses su amor sigue vivo en cada foto y cada recuerdo y cada sonrisa que me dejó y a pesar de que soy alérgica a los gatos su huella quedó para siempre en mi vida.

GENESIS GARCIA, GRADE 10

Back in the USA

Hi, my name is Gerson. Almost two years ago, on April 16, 2024, I moved from Guatemala to the United States. I want to share how I felt during that important transition in my life.

Since I was born in the US and my dad lives here, I had to move to join him. Saying goodbye was difficult at first; my grandparents were there. Then my family arrived and helped me pack: my grandmother, my aunt, and my cousin were essential in helping me accept my departure.

The next day, almost my entire family was there, but a problem arose: I had to pay a \$7,000 fine for having lived in Guatemala for so long. I called my father and waited for a response to see what I could do.

At the time, I didn't know my mom had gotten me dual citizenship and that I could travel. When we arrived, my dad and cousins picked me up. Two months later, I started school. It was difficult not knowing the language, but I began making friends. Little by little, I settled in.

Arriving in this country, which is also my country, and having the support of my aunt Lesly and my cousin Estefany, made me feel much better and at home. Things improved considerably, making me reflect and think that everything happens for a reason and that God's timing is perfect.

De nuevo en EE.UU

Hola, me llamo Gerson. Hace casi dos años, el 16 de abril de 2024, me mudé de Guatemala a Estados Unidos. Quiero compartirles cómo me sentía en esa transición tan importante en mi vida.

Al ser yo nacido en EE.UU. y mi papá vivir aquí, debía mudarme a reunirme con él. Al principio despedirme fue difícil, estaban mis abuelos, luego llegó mi familia y me ayudó a empacar: mi abuela, mi tía y mi prima fueron fundamentales para asimilar mi partida.

Al día siguiente, casi toda mi familia estaba allí, pero surgió un problema: tuve que pagar una multa de 7000 dólares por haber vivido tanto tiempo en Guatemala. Llamé a mi padre y esperé respuestas para ver qué podía hacer.

Entonces no sabía que mi mamá me había conseguido la doble nacionalidad y que podía viajar. Al llegar, mi papá nos recogió a mí y a mis primos. Dos meses después, empecé la escuela. Fue difícil no saber nada del idioma y empecé a hacer amigos. Poco a poco me fui adaptando.

El haber llegado a este país, que es mi país también, y tener el apoyo de mi tía Lesly y mi prima Estefany, me hizo sentir mucho mejor y en casa, las cosas mejoraron bastante, haciéndome reflexionar y pensar que todo pasa por algo y que el tiempo de Dios es perfecto.

GERSON GARCIA, GRADE 12

Gengar

Today I want to talk about my Gengar plush toy, the ghost-type Pokémon. It's a round, purple plush with red eyes and a big smile on the front. My friend Valentina gave me this stuffed animal for my 17th birthday. I usually keep it on a shelf next to my perfumes, surrounded by my other stuffed animals.

This Gengar plush is very special to me because Gengar is one of my favorite characters. I had always wanted one, and now that I finally have it, it makes me really happy. Whenever I see it, I feel calmer and less stressed. It helps me relax and forget about everything that worries me. I will always cherish this plush because it was something I had wanted for a long time, and I'm very grateful to Valentina for giving me such a meaningful gift.

DENNIS GOMEZ, GRADE 10

The First Time I Saw My Dad

Hi, I'm Cristel. I'm 14 years old, and today I want to share the story of when I saw my dad again after 10 years. When he came to the United States, I was little and still in Guatemala, and I didn't have any memories of him. When my sister would talk about a memory she had with him, I would feel sad and try to remember something too, but I couldn't, and it made me cry.

In 2023, the opportunity arose to come to the United States and meet him. It was very sad to say goodbye to my whole family, but it hurt the most to say goodbye to my grandmother because I love her very much. She was like a second mother to me because she always gave me good advice, and I miss her a lot, as well as some of the dogs I had who always made me so happy. But at the same time, I was happy because I was going to meet my dad.

When I arrived in Virginia, USA, I felt a little shy because everything was different: the people, the places, the language. I felt a bit out of place here in this country, and so different from the Cristel I knew back home, especially with the food, since the flavors are so different.

After a few days, I got used to this country, but after a few weeks, I started school. I felt a little nervous because I was going to a different school and meeting new people who spoke English. Over time, I got to know the school better and made new friends, and the teachers were very kind to me. They helped me with many things in class or when I didn't understand any English. I felt happy; I learned that dreams come true because I was able to meet my dad for the first time.

La primera vez que vi a mi papá

Hola soy Cristel tengo 14 años y hoy vengo a contar cuando volví a ver mi papá después de 10 años. Cuando él se vino a Estados Unidos yo estaba chiquita y en Guatemala y yo no tenía ningún recuerdo de él. Cuando mi hermana contaba un recuerdo de él yo me ponía triste y trataba de recordar, pero no tenía ninguno y me ponía a llorar.

En el 2023 hubo la posibilidad de venir a Estados Unidos y conocerlo, fue muy triste despedirme de toda mi familia, pero me dolió más despedirme de mi abuela porque la quiero mucho, ella era como mi segunda madre porque siempre me daba buenos consejos y la extraño mucho al igual que a unos perritos que tenía que siempre me hacían tan feliz. Pero a la vez estaba feliz porque iba a conocer a mi papá.

Cuando llegué a Virginia, Estados Unidos, me sentí algo tímida porque todo era diferente, personas, lugares, idioma. Me sentía algo rara estando aquí en este país y super diferente a la Cristel que vivía en mi país y más con la comida, ya que el sabor varía muchísimo.

Después de uno días yo me fui acostumbrando a este país, pero después de unas semanas entré a la escuela, me sentía algo nerviosa porque iba ir una escuela diferente y personas nuevas que hablaban inglés, con el tiempo fui conociendo más la escuela e hice nuevos amigos y los maestros Después de uno días yo me fui acostumbrando a este país, pero después de unas semanas entré a la escuela, me sentía algo nerviosa porque iba ir una escuela diferente y personas nuevas que hablaban inglés, con el tiempo fui conociendo más la escuela e hice nuevos amigos y los maestros fueron muy amables conmigo me ayudaron en muchas cosas en las clases o cuando no entendía nada de inglés.

Me sentí feliz porque aprendí que los sueños se cumplen porque pude conocer a mi papá por primera vez.

CRISTEL GUTIERREZ, GRADE 9

Me and My Feelings

My name is Rosario, and I'm 18 years old. I didn't know what to talk about in general. I didn't know what I was like, how I felt, or why I felt things so intensely. Believe it or not, I still don't know much about myself. I was trying to learn more about myself.

I don't even know what the first thing was that made everything so confusing. Only now am I trying to understand everything that happened in a year. I went through so much with people I met, I had such a good time with them, and then suddenly I knew almost nothing about them anymore. I ignored them, I just pretended it didn't matter, when clearly it did.

I knew so much and at the same time nothing. My feelings were like a stagnant sea. I didn't know why other people's attitudes mattered so much to me and yet not at all. I was more worried about myself, prioritizing my own well-being over others'. I tried to find myself and see something I was good at, but everything exhausted me. No matter what I tried, from knitting to playing soccer, nothing worked well enough. I only recently realized that I couldn't do it, not because I didn't enjoy it, but because I was only doing it to distract myself and ignore my feelings. What was happening was that I lost interest in something I'd done since I was a child: drawing. I still don't know why things change, but change doesn't necessarily mean something bad.

After weeks of truly taking time to think, at first, I just blamed others and subconsciously continued trying to ignore everything. I talked to myself more times than I care to admit, realizing that things happen for a reason, that it's normal not to always know our feelings, that I don't have to think all the worst of others, that people don't think all negative things about me, but it's also not necessary to ignore them, because far from helping, it makes things worse. At some point, everything explodes and complicates everything even more.

I understood that facing my feelings and taking responsibility for them is difficult, but it's better than just ignoring everything, and trying to change for the better, not just because of one event in life, which is long and has a lot to come.

Mis Sentimientos y Yo

Mi nombre es Rosario, tengo 18 años, no sabía de qué hablar en general, no sabía cómo era, cómo me sentía, o por qué sentía tan intensamente las cosas, parecía mentira o no, aún no sé mucho sobre mí, intentaba aprender más de mí.

Ni siquiera sé qué fue lo primero que hizo todo tan confuso, recién ahora estoy intentando entender todo lo que pasó en un año. Pasé muchas cosas con gente que conocí, pasé tan bien todos los momentos con esas personas y de repente con los mismos ya no sabía casi nada, ignoré, solo fingía que no importaba, cuando claramente sí.

Sabía muchas cosas y a la vez nada, mis sentimientos eran como un mar estancado, no sabía por qué las actitudes de los demás me importaban tanto y a la vez nada. Me preocupaba más por mí, prefería más yo sentir bien antes que los demás, intentaba encontrarme y a la vez ver en algo que era buena, pero todo me cansaba, no importara lo que intentara, ya sea desde tejer hasta jugar fútbol nada me funcionaba lo suficiente, lo que recién entiendo que no podía, no porque no me gustara era porque solo lo hacía para distraerme e ignorar mis sentimientos y lo que pasaba dejó de interesarme algo que hacía desde niña dibujar, aún no sé por qué las cosas cambian, pero que cambie no significa algo malo.

Después de semanas de realmente tomarme tiempo para pensar, al principio solo culpaba a los demás, e inconscientemente seguía intentando ignorar todo, hablé conmigo misma más veces que me gusta admitir, que si las cosas pasan son por algo, es normal no siempre saber nuestros sentimientos, que no tengo que pensar todo lo mal de los demás, que la gente no piensa todo negativo en mí, pero tampoco es necesario ignorarlos que lejos de ser una ayuda afecta más, en algún momento todo estalla y complica todo más.

Entendí que afrontar mis sentimientos y hacerme responsable de ellos sí es difícil, pero es mejor que solo ignorar todo, y tratar de cambiar, pero para bien, no aparte por un solo acontecimiento en la vida, que es larga y falta mucho por pasar.

ROSARIO L. HUIMAN, GRADE II

Fourteen Hours to a New Life

I will never forget the day my life changed forever, the day I left my home country to start a new life in the United States. It was a day filled with emotions, excitement, and a deep sense of uncertainty. Everything began in the early hours of the morning. Around 4 a.m., the house was quiet, but inside, my heart was racing. We

had finished packing the last suitcases, checking documents, and saying goodbye to the familiar walls that had witnessed so many memories. I remember looking around and thinking, this is it. There's no turning back.

Everyone in my family was stressed. The air felt heavy, almost like it was hard to breathe. My mother kept checking the passports over and over again, making sure nothing would go wrong. My father wasn't there yet; he had been living in the United States for ten years, and this was the moment we would finally reunite. That thought gave me hope, but it also made me nervous. Would everything feel the same after so much time apart?

Before we left, something happened that broke my heart. My aunt decided to send my cousin, my best friend, on vacation so he wouldn't cry when we said goodbye. I understood why she did it, but it was still painful. I wanted to see him one last time, to hug him and tell him everything would be okay. Instead, I had to leave without that moment, and it felt like a piece of me stayed behind.

At 6 a.m., we walked out the door for the last time. The streets were still dark, and the cold morning air touched my face as we loaded the suitcases into the car. I stared out the window during the drive to the airport, watching familiar places disappear behind us. Every corner held a memory, and I wondered when, or if, I would ever see them again.

When we arrived at the airport, everything moved so fast. The lines, the security checks, the announcements, it all felt like a blur. Before I knew it, we were boarding the plane. I took my seat and looked out the window, watching the ground slowly disappear as the plane lifted into the sky. My stomach turned with a mix of fear and excitement. Fourteen hours. That's how long the flight lasted. Fourteen hours of thinking about what awaited us, imagining our new life, and wondering if I would fit in, make friends, and ever feel at home again.

When we finally landed, exhaustion hit me like a wave, but there was no time to rest. We had to take a small train to reach the main airport in the city. Everything looked so different: the signs, the people, the language. I felt like a stranger in a new world, and yet something was exciting about it. This was the beginning of something big.

Then came the moment I had been waiting for: seeing my father again. Ten years had passed since he left, and now here he was, standing in front of us. At first, I could barely recognize him because he looked older, but his smile was the same. I ran to him, and when he hugged me, all the years apart seemed to disappear. It was one of the happiest moments of my life.

That night, as we sat together eating and laughing, I realized something important. Yes, we had left behind so much: friends, family, and places we loved, but we were together again. And that made everything worth it. It was a long and exhausting day, but it was also one of the most meaningful days of my life. A day that marked the start of a new journey, full of challenges and opportunities.

A day I will never forget!

ALICE HYDE, GRADE 9

The Salvadoran Grandmother

Hi, I'm Andrea, a 16-year-old Salvadoran. I'll talk about the feelings El Salvador evokes, as a true "guanaca" (a woman from El Salvador), and share the beauty of my country.

Starting with the aroma of rich coffee at 6 a.m., the melodies of the birds and the beautiful songs playing on the radio, the mamasos (a combination of corn tortilla and fresh cheese) that my grandmother used to make, and the beautiful mountain views that bring happiness, peace, and an indescribable emotion. Being Salvadoran is a feeling that no one else can understand, and trying the pupusas from Olocuitla (a thick corn or rice masa tortilla filled with ingredients like cheese, pork rinds, or beans) is something no Salvadoran can miss.

Life is better when you live it in El Salvador; being Salvadoran at heart is like being reborn. The food in the United States doesn't compare to my grandmother's tortillas. With the pure love she made them she transformed mornings into something special, and since I stopped waking up near her, I haven't woken up near her, they're just not the same. What I feel today, being so far away from her and not being able to see her, is indescribable.

Despite not having seen her for so long and the distance that separates us, I feel happy because she's alive and I can see her, even if it's just through a screen. And the thought of hugging her again keeps me hopeful for the future.

I know that even though I'm far from my grandmother, she will always be there for me and will always be the pure, unparalleled love that she always shows me, even through a screen. She makes me feel as if she were by my side.

La Abuelita Salvadoreña

Hola, soy Andrea, salvadoreña de 16 años. Hablaré sobre los sentimientos que El Salvador genera, como verdadera "guanaca", y poder hablarles sobre la belleza que es mi país.

Empezando con el aroma del rico café a las 6 de la mañana, las melodías de los pajaritos y las hermosas canciones que suenan en la radio, los mamasos (una combinación de tortilla de maíz y queso fresco) que me hacía mi abuelita y las hermosas vistas hacia las montañas que generan felicidad, paz y una emoción inexplicable. Ser salvadoreño es un sentimiento que más nadie puede entender y probar las pupusas de Olocuilta (una tortilla gruesa de masa de maíz o arroz rellena de ingredientes como queso, chicharrón o frijoles) es algo que un salvadoreño nunca puede dejar pasar

A pesar de llevar tanto tiempo sin verla y la distancia que nos separa, me siento feliz porque ella está viva y la puedo ver, aunque sea a través de una pantalla. Y el pensamiento de volverla a abrazar me mantiene esperanzada en el futuro.

Sé que, aunque estoy lejos de mi abuelita ella siempre estará para mí y siempre será el amor puro, inigualable que siempre me demuestra que así sea a través de una pantalla ella me hace sentir como si estuviera conmigo.

ANDREA JIMENEZ, GRADE 10

I am Poem

I am a child with a great family, and I am great at soccer.
I wonder if I will find a wonderful wife and have children in the future.
I hear dogs arguing as they fight.
I see videos in my mind.
I want to help my mom.
I am a child with a great family, and I am great at soccer.

I pretend I am sick sometimes, so I don't have to go to school.
I feel happy when playing video games.
I touch my brother when we play soccer.
I worry about my grades.
I cry when I am sad.
I am a child with a great family, and I am great at soccer.

I understand that when I study English, I can communicate with more people.
I say that God will always take care of me.
I dream that everything in my life goes well for me.

I try to learn how to drive a car.
I hope to someday return to EL SALVADOR.
I am a child with a great family, and I am great at soccer.

BRYAN JIMENEZ, GRADE 10

The Birth of My Sister

Hello, my name is Susana, and I want to tell you about the miraculous birth of my youngest sister. One day, I was in the kitchen at my parents' house when they asked me if I would like to have another sister. They left me with that question in my head for a long time, along with the doubt of why they were even asking me that. Everything happened in my home country, El Salvador, two years ago when I was 15 years old.

My parents came home from doing the weekly grocery shopping, just like any other day. They started asking me things like, "Wouldn't it be nice to hear a baby crying throughout the house?" "This house needs a little more life, don't you think?" Among other things. I asked them why they were asking me so many questions, but I didn't have an answer at that moment. Then my father told me seriously, while I was putting things away in the kitchen, "Daughter, do you want to have another sister?" I asked why, and he only answered me at the end of the day, saying, "Your mother is pregnant." I was scared and at the same time paralyzed because I didn't think my mother could have another baby. I told my father that it had to be a joke because it couldn't be true. Then my mother came over and showed me the pregnancy test. I even started to cry from happiness because I had wished for a sister so much.

When we found out the baby's gender, everyone was very happy, including me. I started looking for and buying baby girl clothes and toys. We began decorating her room so that when we brought the baby's crib, everything would be neat and beautiful.

The day my sister was born was a surprise because she was still a month away from her due date. My mother had only gone to the doctor for a medical appointment, and when she arrived, the doctors asked her to stay overnight at the hospital while waiting for some missing test results. In the end, the next day, when my father was on his way to the hospital to pick her up, she called him and told him to bring all the baby things because the baby girl had already been born. My father rushed to the hospital as quickly as possible to see her, so excited to meet the baby. When he entered the room where the newborns were kept, he had his gown on backwards, and the funniest part was that he couldn't find my sister in the room. But the good thing was that she was the only baby girl with the name my parents had chosen.

We all ended up very happy and grateful to God for the miracle that my mother was able to have another baby, since the doctors had told her chances were low and that she could die during childbirth. That's when I realized that miracles do exist, and that when we ask God for things with faith, they can come true.

El nacimiento de mi hermana

Hola, mi nombre es Susana y quiero hablarles sobre el milagroso nacimiento de mi última hermana. Un día yo estaba en la cocina de casa de mis padres, ellos me preguntaron si me gustaría tener otra hermana, me dejaron con la pregunta en la cabeza durante un largo tiempo y la duda de por qué me preguntaban eso. Todo pasó en mi país de origen, El Salvador, hace 2 años cuando yo tenía 15 años.

Mis padres llegan como cualquier otro día de hacer el mercado para la semana, me empiezan a preguntar cosas como, ¿Sería bonito escuchar a un bebé gritando por toda la casa?, ¿A esta casa le hace falta vida verdad? Entre otras más, yo le pregunté porque me hacía tantas preguntas que no tenían una respuesta en ese momento, entonces mi padre me dijo seriamente mientras yo arreglaba las cosas en la cocina, ¿hija quieres tener otra hermana? yo pregunté por qué y él sólo me respondió hasta el final del día, y me dijo tu madre está embarazada, yo me quedé asustada y al mismo tiempo paralizada porque no creí que mi madre pudiera tener otro bebé,

le dije a mi padre que eso sólo era una broma porque no podía ser verdad, entonces mi madre se acercó y me enseñó la prueba de embarazo, me puse hasta a llorar de la felicidad porque deseaba tanto una hermana.

Cuando nos dimos cuenta del sexo del bebé todos estaban muy felices, y también yo, empecé a buscar y comprar ropa para niña y juguetes, comenzamos a decorar su cuarto para que el día que llevamos la cuna de la niña todo estuviera ordenado y bonito.

El día que mi hermana nació fue una sorpresa porque incluso todavía le faltaba un mes para su nacimiento, mi madre sólo fue al doctor por una cita médica y cuando llegó allí los doctores le pidieron que se quedara en el hospital esa noche para esperar los resultados que le faltaban, y al final al siguiente día que mi padre iba hacia el hospital a recoger a mi madre ella llamó y le comentó que llevara todas las cosas del bebé porque ya había nacido la niña, mi padre salió lo más rápido posible hacia el hospital para ver a la niña, de la emoción que llevaba por conocer a la bebé, cuando entró al cuarto donde tienen a los recién nacidos en el hospital la bata la llevaba al revés y lo más chistoso es no encontraba a mi hermana en el cuarto, pero lo bueno fue que era la única niña con el nombre que mis padres le habían escogido.

Todos terminamos muy felices y agradecidos con Dios por el milagro de que mi mamá pudiera tener otro bebé, ya que la posibilidad que los doctores le habían dado a mi madre era poca porque podía morir durante el parto y ahí me pude dar cuenta que los milagros sí existen y que cuando pedimos las cosas con tanta fe a Dios se consigue.

SUSANA LOPEZ, GRADE 10

My Best Friend

I arrived in the state of Florida after COVID, and that's when I started school. It was very difficult for me to adapt to the culture. Everything felt different: the people, the language, and the way I was treated. When I first started school, I felt very insecure and embarrassed about myself because my style was different from everyone else's. I wore wine-red heels, short military cargo shorts, and a pink shirt that was a bit tight on me. I had also cut my hair very short and worn a mask. Because of how I dressed, some people laughed and joked about my style.

That made me start keeping things to myself. I became quieter and more introverted. Over time, I tried to change some things about myself and started hanging out with a group of people. I thought they were my friends, but I realized later that I was only an acquaintance to them. They went out together, made plans without me, and only messaged me when they needed favors. That made me feel very alone, and I became even more introverted. I started to notice that some of the people I considered friends would talk badly about me behind my back and then act normally with me. I've never liked hypocrisy, and it hurt to realize that.

That's how things were until I met Haley. At first, we didn't talk at all. We only knew of each other's existence. Later, she had a boyfriend, and for some reason, that made things a little awkward, so we still didn't talk much. But when I entered high school, she approached me, and we started talking more. Over time, we became close. I began to see her as a real friend. I started sharing my thoughts and problems with her, and she helped me. I was there for her, too, whenever she felt bad.

Whenever I was with Haley, we laughed a lot and played around. She is a very happy person who loves to joke and cheer everyone up. Anyone who spends time with her can feel her positive and energetic vibe. Even when life was difficult, she always managed to make me smile.

Later, I had to move out of state, and she started working after school. That made our communication less frequent because she was busy with studying and work. Still, whenever we talk, even if it's only once a week, she always makes my mood better. She has helped me through many things that I didn't know how to fix on my own. She was there for me in moments when I felt like I couldn't talk to anyone else. I will always consider her my best friend and one of the best people I have ever met. I wouldn't change her for anything.

Mi mejor amiga

Llegué al estado de Florida después del COVID y fue entonces cuando comencé la escuela. Me resultó muy difícil adaptarme a la cultura. Todo se sentía diferente: las personas, el idioma y la manera en que me trataban. Cuando empecé la escuela, me sentía muy inseguro y avergonzado de mí mismo porque mi forma de vestir era distinta a la de los demás. Usaba tacones color vino, shorts cortos estilo militar y una blusa rosada un poco ajustada. También me había cortado el cabello muy corto y usaba mascarilla. Por mi forma de vestir, algunas personas se reían y hacían bromas sobre mi estilo.

Eso me hizo empezar a guardarme las cosas para mí. Me volví más callado e introvertido. Con el tiempo traté de cambiar algunas cosas y empecé a juntarme con un grupo de personas. Pensé que eran mis amigos, pero después me di cuenta de que solo era un conocido para ellos. Salían en grupo, hacían planes sin mí y solo me escribían cuando necesitaban favores. Eso me hizo sentir muy solo y me volví aún más introvertido. También empecé a notar que algunas de las personas que yo consideraba amigos hablaban mal de mí con otros y luego actuaban como si nada cuando estaban conmigo. Nunca me ha gustado la hipocresía, y eso me dolió mucho.

Así estaban las cosas hasta que conocí a Haley. Al principio no hablábamos. Solo sabíamos de la existencia del otro. Después ella tuvo un novio y, por alguna razón, eso hizo que siguiéramos sin hablar mucho. Pero cuando entré a la preparatoria, ella se me acercó y comenzamos a hablar más. Con el tiempo nos hicimos cercanos. Empecé a verla como una amiga de verdad. Le conté mis cosas y ella me ayudó, y yo también estuve para ella cuando se sentía mal.

Cada vez que estaba con Haley, nos reíamos mucho y jugábamos. Ella es una persona muy alegre que siempre está bromeando y animando a los demás. Cualquiera que se acerca a ella siente su energía positiva y su vibra feliz. Incluso cuando la vida era difícil, ella siempre lograba hacerme sonreír.

Después tuve que mudarme a otro estado y ella empezó a trabajar después de la escuela. Eso hizo que habláramos menos porque estaba ocupada con el estudio y el trabajo. Aun así, cada vez que hablamos, aunque sea una vez a la semana, siempre logra mejorar mi ánimo. Me ha ayudado en muchas cosas que no sabía cómo resolver por mi cuenta. Estuvo para mí en momentos en los que sentía que no podía hablar con nadie más. Siempre la consideraré mi mejor amiga y una de las mejores personas que he conocido. No la cambiaría por nada.

SEBASTIAN MARQUEZ, GRADE II

The Way to my New Home

When I came to the United States, I arrived by plane. My trip was at night, so I thought I wouldn't see much, but the first thing I saw when I looked out the window was a city full of lights. All the houses and places were lit up, and the sky was very dark. The second thing I noticed was the sky itself; it was full of stars. It looked so beautiful, and I took a lot of photos. The next moment was when I got off the plane. There were blocks of ice from the snow, and it was very cold. Finally, I noticed that the people were very different, but still kind. That was the beginning of my new life.

The first time I went to a fair in the United States, there were many animals, and for the first time in my life, I saw a camel. It was big and tall. I was very surprised because I had never seen a camel before. It had a hump, and it was brown. My family was also very surprised. We loved seeing all the animals because in my country, we had never seen animals like that. We bought food to give them, and it was funny to watch how they chewed. I even had the chance to touch the camel, and it felt very soft. I loved that day very much, and it will always be a special memory in my mind.

I arrived in the United States in February at night, and the weather was very cold compared to my country. In my country, there isn't really winter. Before, there used to be something like autumn, but not anymore. The cold I felt here was so strong that it almost made me want to go back.

After some months, spring arrived. Everything looked very beautiful. We went to Washington, D.C., to see the cherry blossom trees with their pink flowers. Then summer arrived. I didn't think it would be so hot, but it was very hot, maybe even hotter than in my country. After that, autumn arrived. The trees turned orange, and the leaves began to fall. It is something I had never seen before in my country.

One of the biggest changes for me was the food. The fruits, the vegetables, everything is different here. When I tried the fruits here, they were very sweet. What fascinated me the most were the tangerines. They are very juicy, and I had never eaten something like that before.

When I tried foods from El Salvador, my country, the flavor felt a little strange at first, especially the dish called pupusas. They were similar to what I remembered, but not the same. The beans and eggs here were also different from the ones in my country. It took me some time to get used to these new flavors, but little by little I did.

When I arrived in the United States, I had two weeks before starting school. During that time, I had to get vaccinated. There were many vaccines, but after that, I was able to begin my studies. My first day of school was good. I met people from Guatemala, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, and many other places. I had never met so many people from different countries before.

My second day was more difficult. I got lost and didn't know where my classes were, but little by little, I started to get used to everything. My family took me to many places, like buffets, parks with many trees, and to see the cherry blossom trees. Those moments helped me feel more comfortable.

At first, school was difficult, but over time, I got used to it. My grades improved, and I began to understand English better. When I came here, I was able to meet family members who live here. I visited them and got to know them all. My favorite places to go are beaches and parks. I really enjoy walking and taking pictures of forests and nature. Right now, I am studying and getting increasingly used to this country. I have also made more friends, and little by little, this place is starting to feel like home.

KATHLYN NAOMY MARTINEZ, GRADE 9

Soccer

My name is Merlin, and I'll be sharing my story of how I started playing soccer. I'm 17 years old, and I fell in love with this sport when I was 10, back in my home country, beautiful El Salvador.

The first thing that happened was that when I watched my brothers play, I was happy and always said that when I grew up I wanted to play on a team, and when I was about 10 years old I started playing and I was very passionate about it because my dad and my brothers gave me a lot of inspiration and I remember my dad telling me: keep going like this and you will achieve playing on a professional team.

I managed to join a team, and one afternoon the coach had to choose a captain. I was so nervous, and then I heard my name called. I was so surprised and speechless because I never imagined he would choose me as captain. I remember that on December 31st, we had a tournament, and many teams were coming to play. Thank God, we won first place, and they gave us a trophy. My team and I were so happy because we received a trophy.

Time passed, and I always went out to play with my team, and then everything changed because I was going to come to the United States. I was sad because I was no longer going to belong to that team. That's how my soccer story in El Salvador ended, but I hope it continues here in this new country where I now live.

Thanks to what I experienced, I learned that you shouldn't stay in the same place, and you have to fulfill all the dreams you want in this life. With God's help and the encouragement that family gives us, we must be grateful for the opportunities that appear.

Fútbol

Mi nombre es Merlin y hablaré sobre mi historia de cómo comencé a jugar fútbol. Tengo 17 años y desde los 10 me enamoré de este deporte allá en mi país natal, el bello El Salvador.

Lo primero que pasó fue que cuando miraba jugar a mis hermanos yo me alegraba y siempre decía que cuando estuviera más grande quería jugar en un equipo, y cuando tenía unos 10 años comencé a jugar y me apasionaba mucho porque mi papá y mis hermanos me daban mucha inspiración y recuerdo que mi papá me decía: siga así que va a lograr jugar en un equipo profesional.

Logré entrar a un equipo y hubo una tarde en la que el entrenador debía elegir una capitana para este y yo estaba muy nerviosa, luego escuché mi nombre y yo me quedé sorprendida y sin palabras porque nunca me imaginé que me iba a elegir de capitana. Y me acuerdo que para un 31 de diciembre teníamos un torneo e iban a llegar muchos equipos a jugar y gracias a Dios ganamos el primer lugar y nos dieron un trofeo y mi equipo y yo estábamos muy felices porque nos dieron un trofeo.

Pasó un tiempo y siempre salía a jugar con mi equipo y ya de ahí cambió todo porque me iba a venir para los Estados Unidos, estaba triste porque ya no iba a pertenecer a ese equipo, así terminó mi historia de soccer en El Salvador, pero espero que continúe aquí en este nuevo país donde ahora vivo.

Gracias a lo que viví, aprendí que no hay que quedarse en el mismo lugar y hay que cumplir todos los sueños que uno desea en esta vida y con la ayuda de Dios y los ánimos que nos da la familia hay que agradecer las oportunidades que aparecen.

MERLIN ESTEFANI MAZARIEGO, GRADE 10

A Nerve-Racking Story

At first, I was very nervous. I had never presented at an open house event before. I felt stressed and anxious, but I tried to do my best because it was the most important project of the year. My partner talked about the Constitution, more specifically the Preamble, the Articles, and the Bill of Rights.

I tried to explain why the Constitution is important for the country. I prepared the paper and materials to start my poster with my partner, but I couldn't stop thinking about what my presentation would be like because, in my opinion, my pronunciation was not very good. Even though I knew I had to do it, not because I wanted to, but because I had no other choice, I still tried.

When I was presenting, I was trembling. But it wasn't so bad, because while I was doing it, I tried to concentrate and stay focused. After presenting repeatedly, I stopped worrying so much about how I sounded and started to feel more comfortable. I also tried to enjoy my last moments with my classmates since it would be our last class together.

Now I don't feel as ashamed when I try to speak in English. I feel more confident than before, and I am proud that I was able to do it.

DARCY MEJIA, GRADE 9

The Time I Fainted on the Roller Coaster

Hello, I'm Dayra and I want to share my story about the time I fainted on a roller coaster. I had always wanted to ride a roller coaster because there aren't any in my country. I used to watch them and wonder what it would feel like to be on one.

One day in 2024, I arrived at my dad's house and greeted my cousins. One of them asked me if I wanted to go somewhere new, and I replied, "Yes." Then he continued, saying, "I'm going to show you a place so you can see if you like it. If not, we'll go somewhere else." He showed me Kings Dominion, since they had already been there and enjoyed that park.

We arrived at Kings Dominion and waited in line until it was our turn to get on. I was very nervous and asked one of my cousins to help me buckle up because I was sweating. My cousin told me that they were going to check, and someone came and buckled me in. I asked if it was properly fastened, and she said yes, so we started going up. I held the hands of my cousins who were next to me, and when we were at the lower part of

the roller coaster and turning, I felt the harness come undone. I panicked and fainted. My cousins were beside me and saw that my head was down.

My cousins panicked, and the ride operators stopped the attraction. The medical staff came in and took me away in an ambulance. When I arrived at the hospital, they started examining me, and I had to stay in the hospital for two days. After this experience, my cousins told me that I was really scared of them.

I learned that I should not get nervous or panic, as it can cause something serious. I should always stay relaxed.

La Vez que me Desmayé en la Montaña Rusa

Hola soy Dayra les vengo a contar mi historia de cuando me desmayé en la montaña rusa. Yo desde siempre me había querido subir a una montaña ya que en mi 2 país no hay, yo siempre las miraba y me preguntaba qué se sentiría estar en una de ellas.

Un día del año 2024 llegué a la casa de mi papá y saludé a mis primos, uno de ellos me preguntó si quería ir a un lugar para que conociera y le respondí: sí, luego continuó diciendo: Te voy a enseñar el lugar para que veas si te gusta. Si no, vamos a otro. Me enseñó King Dominion, ya que ellos ya habían ido y disfrutado de ese parque.

Llegamos a King Dominion y esperamos en la fila hasta que nos tocó entrar. Estaba muy nerviosa y le pedí a una prima que me ayudara a abrocharme porque estaba sudando. Mi prima me dijo que iban a revisar, y vinieron y me abrocharon. Le pregunté si estaba bien abrochado y me dijo que sí, entonces empezamos a subir. Agarré las manos de mis primas que estaban a mi lado y cuando estábamos en la parte baja de la montaña rusa y girando, sentí que el arnés se desabrochaba. Entré en pánico y me desmayé. Mis primos iban a mi lado y vieron que tenía la cabeza agachada

Mis primos entraron en pánico y los encargados de la atracción la detuvieron, entraron los médicos y me llevaron en ambulancia y cuando llegué al hospital me comenzaron a revisar y tuve que pasar dos días en el hospital y mis primos luego de esta experiencia me dijeron que yo los asusté mucho.

Aprendí a que no debo de ponerme nerviosa ni entrar en pánico ya que puede causar algo grave siempre estar relajada.

DAYRA MENDOZA, GRADE 9

My Way to My New Home

My journey to my new home was very difficult because I went through many things, and many things changed in my life. For example, school here ends very late. In my country, it ends at 12 noon, and here it ends at 3:00. When I first arrived, I didn't know anyone except my family. However, when I started school, I began meeting new people and having new experiences, like riding a school bus for the first time. I also discovered many new foods when I came here.

When I arrived in this country, I went through some hard moments. At first, I stayed at my sister's house. I had not seen her in a long time. I knew her when I was very little, but she had moved here before me. It felt strange and emotional to see her again and live in her house. Her house was very different from the one I had in Honduras, which was much bigger. I lived there for one month, and then I moved to my brother's house. His house is also very big. I had a good time there because I spent a lot of time with my nephew. We played on our phones and played outside together. It was a very nice period for me after arriving in the United States.

After that, I moved to Manassas. At first, I did not have a good time. I stayed inside all day and felt bored and lonely. But everything changed when I started school. It was a big change from my home in Honduras and all the other places I had lived, but it helped me feel more connected.

My environment has changed a lot since I started school. I met friends and moved to the house where I live now. Everything feels different. Now I go for walks, go out to eat, and spend time with people. My

mood has improved because having more people in my life has created a more positive atmosphere for me. My life right now is very different from what I imagined this year would be like. Last year, I thought I would continue my studies in Honduras, but everything changed very quickly. I never thought my life would be like this.

I am trying to get used to it little by little. While I am here, I want to take advantage of the opportunities I have and learn from

this experience. There are many differences between this school and my old school. I don't feel completely comfortable yet because everything is new, but little by little, I am adapting. I am starting to like it more each day. It will never be exactly like my old school, because I liked that one very much, especially the schedule and the classes. But I am beginning to find things I like here, too.

Here I have met family members I had never seen in person before. I had only heard about them. Many of my dad's relatives live here, like my cousins, uncles, and aunts. I get along well with them, especially my aunts, who have been very kind to me. I also get along very well with my younger cousin. Spending time with family helps me feel less alone.

In my country, it is hot all year round. Only in October and December does it rain more. When I arrived in this country, it was fall. The weather was cool, and sometimes very cold. I was very surprised. The leaves changed color and fell from the trees. The colors were very beautiful. Winter in the United States is very cold. There is a lot of snow. The first time I saw snow, I was very surprised. I touched it, and it burned my hands because it was so cold. I was with my brother, and we played in the snow every day. It was very fun. In winter, we do not go outside as much. Spring is very pretty. Flowers begin to grow, and the weather feels good, not too hot. There is a lot of pollen, and many people have allergies, but I do not. Fall is my favorite season. The trees are colorful and beautiful. I like going to see the tulip fields.

One day, I was lying in my bed, feeling calm, when suddenly I saw a beautiful deer looking through my window. I called my cousin to come see it. We took a video, and then I went outside to look at the deer more closely. It was very big and beautiful. When I went outside, the deer saw me and ran away. It was the first time I had ever seen a deer. I followed it for a moment and saw it go near the trees. Before it left, I saw it eating tomatoes from the garden at my house. After that day, the deer came back many times. From the first moment I saw it, I was very surprised. Deer are very interesting animals. They are careful and always alert to sounds. In my country, we do not have deer, or at least I have never seen one before.

This journey has been difficult, but I am learning to adapt. Every day I am growing, learning, and getting stronger. I still miss my old home, but I am slowly building a new one here. I will keep moving forward, little by little, because I know that great things take time.



EMELY MENDOZA, GRADE 9

My First Love

My name is Chris. I was at my school in 2023, it was April. I was at recess, watching the others play, shout, run, talk, everything. I felt alone because I didn't have anyone by my side to talk to. I lowered my gaze, waiting for the bell to ring for class, until a girl approached me. That's where the story begins. It was wonderful meeting such an amazing girl. It was hard when she left, but with time, I learned to live without her.

As the days went by, we became friends. One day, she confessed her feelings for me (I also felt something for her). We became a couple a few days after her confession. Everything felt beautiful until, in 2024, near the end of the year, she started acting distant and seriously. Every text message she sent hurt my heart (I should mention that by then, I was already in the United States). One day, she simply disappeared without saying goodbye.

She left forever. I felt regretful and guilty. I became depressed, but then I thought, "She would want me to live." With time, I learned that I should value what I have, because at first I felt guilty for not having made better memories with her. I was so depressed that I didn't want to eat, and I didn't want to do anything. Little by little, I started to heal, and I stopped feeling guilty.

Now I feel happy for what happened, not sad because it's over. I learned that holding on to the past keeps you from focusing on your present.

Mi Primer Amor

Me llamo Chris. Estaba en mi escuela en 2023, era abril. Estaba en el recreo, viendo a los demás jugar, gritar, correr, hablar, todo. Me sentía solo porque no tenía a nadie a mi lado con quien hablar. Bajé la mirada, esperando a que sonara el timbre para entrar a clase, hasta que una chica se me acercó. Ahí es donde comienza la historia. Fue maravilloso conocer a una chica tan increíble. Fue difícil cuando se fue, pero con el tiempo aprendí a vivir sin ella.

A medida que pasaban los días, nos hicimos amigos. Un día, ella me confesó sus sentimientos por mí (yo también sentía algo por ella). Nos convertimos en pareja unos días después de su confesión. Todo se sentía hermoso hasta que, en 2024, cerca del final del año, empezó a comportarse de manera distante y seria. Cada mensaje de texto que enviaba lastimaba mi corazón (debo mencionar que para entonces yo ya estaba en los Estados Unidos). Un día, simplemente desapareció sin decir adiós.

Se fue para siempre. Me sentí arrepentido y culpable. Caí en una depresión, pero luego pensé: "Ella querría que yo viviera". Con el tiempo, aprendí que debía valorar lo que tengo, porque al principio me sentía culpable por no haber creado mejores recuerdos con ella. Estaba tan deprimido que no quería comer ni hacer nada. Poco a poco, empecé a sanar y dejé de sentirme culpable.

Ahora me siento feliz por lo que pasó, no triste porque terminó. Aprendí que aferrarse al pasado te impide concentrarte en tu presente.

CHRIST MENJIVAR, GRADE 9

Bad Influences in Peru

My name is Marlon Ortiz, and I'm from Peru. This story happened last year, and more than a bad experience, it taught me a lesson. These paragraphs reflect what a 15-year-old boy went through with a group he considered friends at the time.

When I was still studying in Peru, I was in a group of friends who had the influence of slackers, but they were, so to speak, popular. Well, I joined this group not because I was popular, tall, wealthy, or handsome like most of the group members. Rather, it was because I was good at most of the video games they played; I got along well with them.

They would invite me to parties or outings, and I mostly declined because I knew my mother wouldn't let me. But sometimes I did sneak out, and I don't regret it. We went to the beach on motorcycles, and there was

one time I went out from 3 p.m. until 10 p.m. They had bad habits like smoking and drinking. I didn't get involved in those because I knew the trouble I'd get into. For a while, they made fun of me, calling me "idiot" or "You're missing out!" But I let it go, and made fun of them too, like the time a friend said he smoked and hadn't hung up on his mother (I still tease him about it to this day), or how bad they were at picking up women.

I kept hanging out with them, and above all, they made me love something I still love today: soccer. At first, I was terrible; I couldn't even control the ball. But I noticed something I had that others didn't: I often moved without thinking, as if my body knew where to go and what to do. I made plays that even my friends would ask, "How did you do that?" It was the first time I felt useful at something, and I really enjoyed it. Unfortunately, my group of friends was growing. At first, there were five of us, but we kept getting bigger, and I realized that there were people with a lot of influence who only talked to me because I was in the group; they didn't even know me.

Later, I realized they were already really into that stuff, like going to parties, having sex, or smoking. I remember it was when I was in my junior year of high school, and I'd been friends with them for two years. The moment I found out they were going down that path, I distanced myself, but I didn't stop talking to them. I even made more friends who were less into drugs or scandalous behavior, but they had that something I liked and missed a lot: their wit, their mischievousness, and their playful banter without being awkward. I was with them for a while until I came to the United States, and I really miss them because every recess was great. But I realized something: I never got into the drugs myself, but I did have to do a few things to stay in the group. I realized that wanting to belong to a group makes you do things that mostly aren't worth it, but sometimes they are.

Thanks to this experience, I learned that I have a very strong mind for not going down the path of addiction, but I did do things that would help my self-esteem, like going out more, talking more, and improving my pronunciation and fluency, and trying more of those things that embarrass me, since you have nothing to lose, haha. I'm also grateful to my past self for trying to play soccer, as it's one of the reasons why I have friends today, I'm healthy, and above all, I'm alive.

Malas Influencias en Perú

Soy Marlon Ortiz y soy de Perú, esta historia pasó el año pasado y más que una mala experiencia me dejó una lección. Estos párrafos reflejan lo que un joven de 15 años vivió con un grupo, que, en su momento, consideró amigos

Cuando aún estudiaba en Perú yo estuve en un grupo de amigos en donde estos tenían influencia de vagos, pero eran por así decirlo populares, pues yo entré en este grupo, no por ser popular, alto, adinerado o guapo como era la mayoría de los del grupo. Sino por ser bueno en la mayoría de los videojuegos que ellos jugaban, me llevaba bien con ellos.

Me invitaban a fiestas o salidas, yo la mayoría no aceptaba esas invitaciones ya que sabía que mi madre no me dejaría, pero a veces sí me escapaba y no me arrepiento, fuimos a la playa en moto o el día que salí de las 3 de la tarde hasta las 10 de la noche. Ellos tenían vicios malos como fumar o tomar. En eso sí no entré porque sabía en los problemas que me iba a meter, durante un tiempo recibí burlas por parte de ellos, me decían "pavo" o "sano" que sería inocente o baboso. Pero yo no me quedé así y también me burlaba de ellos, como una vez que un amigo dijo que fumaba y no había colgado la llamada con su madre (hasta hoy día lo molesto con eso) o lo pavos que eran para conquistar mujeres.

Seguí saliendo con ellos y sobre todo ellos me hicieron amar una cosa que amo hasta el día de hoy, el fútbol. Al principio era muy malo ya que no podía ni controlar la pelota, pero noté algo que tenía y otros no, muchas veces me movía sin pensar, como si mi cuerpo supiera a dónde ir y qué hacer. Con eso hacía jugadas que hasta mis amigos me decían: ¿cómo hiciste eso? Fue la primera vez en la que me sentía útil en algo y que me gustaba mucho. Lamentablemente mi grupo de amigos se estaba expandiendo con más gente, al principio éramos cinco,

pero nos fuimos agrandando y me daba cuenta de que había gente con mucha influencia que me hablaba solo por ser del grupo, ni me conocían.

Después me di cuenta de que ellos ya estaban muy metidos en esas cosas, como ir a fiestas, tener relaciones o fumar. Me acuerdo que fue cuando estaba en cuarto de secundaria y ya llevaba con ellos dos años de amistad, en ese instante que me enteré que iban en esos pasos, yo me distancié, pero no les dejaba de hablar, hasta hice más amigos que eran menos viciosos o escandalosos, pero tenían ese toque que a mí me gusta y que extrañaba mucho, la viveza, el ser pícaro y bromear demasiado sin llegar a ser incómodo. Estuve un buen tiempo con ellos hasta que llegué a Estados Unidos y la verdad, los extraño mucho ya que cada recreo era muy bueno. Pero me di cuenta de algo que fue que en ningún momento entré en los vicios, pero sí tuve que hacer una que otra cosa para poder seguir en el grupo. Me di cuenta de que por querer pertenecer a un grupo haces cosas que mayormente no valen la pena, pero a veces sí.

Gracias a esta experiencia aprendí que tengo una mente muy fuerte al no entrar a ese camino de la adicción, pero sí hice cosas que me ayudarían a mi autoestima, como salir más, hablar más y mejorar mi pronunciación y mi fluidez, intentar más esas cosas que me dan vergüenza, ya que uno no pierde nada jeje. También agradezco a mi yo del pasado por intentar jugar soccer, ya que es una de las razones por las que hoy tengo amigos, estoy sano y sobre todo vivo.

MARLON OTRIZ, GRADE II

Born and Now Raised in the USA

My name is Ashley. I was born in the USA but raised in Bolivia. On October 28th, I came to the United States with my mom and sister. My first day in the USA felt strange since it was a new and unfamiliar country. In the following paragraphs, I will narrate my experience of changing my country of residence.

When I found out I had a trip to the US, I couldn't believe it because I wasn't ready to leave my country, my friends, my family, my culture. I knew that in a new country I would have to make new friends and get used to its customs. The last few days in my country were difficult, saying goodbye to all the people I love, knowing I wouldn't see them for a long time. I felt sad and excited at the same time because I was going to experience a new country, new cultures, and new people. My arrival in the USA was something new for me. Many people spoke another language, which I understood very little. I stayed at my aunt's house with my mom and my sister. I remember that the first few days I felt very bad, and I missed my country a lot.

My brother was the one who motivated me, gave me advice, and everything; he was always there for me. After a month, I started school. My first day was strange because I was surrounded by strangers, and I didn't speak much English. But after a while, I got to know new people, made new friends, and the teachers were very kind to me. Now I'm much more settled in this country, which is my homeland, and I remember Bolivia more with joy than with nostalgia and sadness.

I learned that being in a new country can't be all bad. With the help of my mom and brother, I was able to adjust little by little. I've been in the US for a year now, my English is improving gradually, I've learned a lot, and I've made new friends.

Nacida y ahora criada en EEUU

Soy Ashley. Soy nacida en los EEUU , pero me crié en Bolivia. Un 28 de octubre me vine a los Estados Unidos acompañada de mi mamá y mi hermana. Mi primer día en los EE.UU. lo sentí extraño ya que era un país nuevo y desconocido para mí. En los siguientes párrafos narraré mi experiencia de cambiar de país de residencia.

Al enterarme de que tenía un viaje a los EEUU, no me lo podía creer porque no estaba lista para dejar mi país, a mis amigas, mi familia, mi cultura. Sabía que estando en un nuevo país tenía que hacer nuevos amigos

y acostumbrarme a sus hábitos. Los últimos días en mi país fueron difíciles, despedirme de todas las personas que quiero, sabiendo que no las veré por mucho tiempo. Me sentí triste y emocionada a la vez porque iba a conocer un nuevo país, nuevas culturas y personas.

Mi llegada a los EEUU fue algo nuevo para mí, muchas personas hablaban otro idioma el cual entendía muy poco, me hospedé en casa de mi tía con mi mamá y mi hermana, me acuerdo de que los primeros días me sentía muy mal, extrañaba mucho mi país.

Mi hermano fue quien me motivó, me daba consejos y demás, él siempre estuvo atento conmigo. Al pasar un mes empecé la escuela, mi primer día fue extraño porque estaba rodeada de personas extrañas, no hablaba mucho inglés, pero después de un tiempo fui conociendo nuevas personas, me hice nuevas amigas y los maestros fueron muy buenos conmigo. Actualmente ya estoy más habituada a este país, que es mi país natal, y recuerdo ahora más Bolivia con alegría que con nostalgia y tristeza.

Aprendí que estar en un nuevo país no puede ser tan malo, con la ayuda de mi mamá y mi hermano pude acostumbrarme poco a poco, ya cumplí un año de estar en los EEUU , mi inglés está mejorando, aprendí muchas cosas e hice nuevos amigos.

ASHLEY PEREDO, GRADE II

My Life in the USA

A year ago, I moved from Honduras to the United States with my family. It was a big change because I had to learn a new language and meet new people, but now I feel more comfortable and happier here. My name is Allison, I am 16 years old, and below I will tell you how that change was for me.

A month before, my sister told my mom and me that she wanted us to be here in the U.S. with her. She asked us if we wanted her to bring us over. We said yes, we were very excited, and my sister told us to get everything ready: who would take care of our pets, who would watch the house, and what we would do with the cars and motorcycles, since we couldn't just leave them there because they would get ruined. The best option was to sell the cars and motorcycles, and everything was fine up to that point. After that, the problem was who we would leave our house with.

We started looking for someone who could take care of our pets and the house, and then my sister told us that her mother-in-law would do it. The big day came, and my sister told us where we had to go to meet our guide. At ten at night, we arrived at the hotel; our guide was waiting for us and began explaining everything we would do, the route we would take, and so on. I was very nervous and scared, but also happy because I was going to be with my sister.

Then we arrived at immigration. They gave us clean clothes, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and a place to shower. We ate juice, an apple, a cookie, and a burrito. They asked us why we wanted to enter the United States, if we had a family member or someone who would receive us. We said yes and gave my sister's information. They told us to wait again until they called us once they had spoken with her. They separated us from my stepfather and took him to a place where there were only men, and my mom, my little sister, and I were taken to a place where all the women were.

We waited there about five hours, and then they took us again to speak with an immigration officer. He told us they had already contacted my sister, and she had already bought the tickets. We needed to be ready for when the bus left that would take us to the shelter. Half an hour later, they returned our belongings, and we boarded the bus. We arrived at a shelter in Dallas, Texas, where they gave us hot chocolate and a sandwich, and they also gave us clothes. Then we contacted my sister, and she asked them to take us to another shelter where we would sort out the plane tickets. We waited about another half hour. They made us line up to get on the bus that would take us to the next shelter. When we arrived, they had my mom go to a desk.

After that, they took us to another place where we would stay. I remember it looked like a parking area, but many beds and people had been there for months. They gave my family and me two beds; they weren't very big, more like cots. Then they took us to the dining room. There was a children's area with board games, bathrooms, and cafeteria. They gave us a sandwich, an apple, and water. After eating, we were on the phone with my sister, arranging the tickets. Once everything was ready, we went to the place where they printed the tickets, and they told us what time we would be leaving so they could take us to the airport. They also explained that we would have a connecting flight: first, we would arrive in a place whose name I don't remember, and then from there take another flight to Washington, D.C. And that's how it was.

When we arrived at the airport, my sisters and my brothers-in-law were waiting for us. I was very happy because when my sister left for the U.S., I thought I would never see her again. Then they took us to a restaurant. On the way, I was looking at how beautiful and clean everything was. It wasn't hot or cold; I don't know, everything felt unreal to me. We got to the restaurant and ate, and we took many pictures. When we finished, my sister told us she would take us to buy clothes. After that, we arrived home. They gave us a furnished room; my mom, my stepfather, my little sister, and I would sleep there for a while until we moved to a bigger house. After a few days, I started going to high school. At first, it was strange because I didn't know anyone, but then I got used to it. Now it feels easier because I understand the language a bit better, and I already have many friends. I learned that adapting to a new place takes time, but it is always worth trying. In the end, I felt happy and proud of not giving up.

Mi vida en EEUU

Hace un año, me mudé de Honduras a Estados Unidos con mi familia. Fue un gran cambio porque tuve que aprender un nuevo idioma y conocer gente nueva, pero ahora me siento más cómoda y feliz aquí. Mi nombre es Allison, tengo 16 años y a continuación les narraré cómo fue ese cambio.

Un mes antes, mi hermana nos dijo a mi mamá y a mí que ella quería que nosotras estuviéramos aquí, en EE. EE. UU., con ella, entonces nos preguntó si queríamos que nos mandara a traer. Nosotras le dijimos que sí, que nos emocionamos bastante, y mi hermana nos dijo que preparamos todo, o sea, con quién iban a quedar nuestras mascotas, quién cuidaría la casa, qué haríamos con los carros, las motos, ya que no podíamos solo dejar las cosas ahí porque se arruinan. Lo mejor era vender los carros y las motos, y ya hasta ahí todo bien.

Después, el problema era con quién dejaríamos nuestra casa, y comenzamos a buscar a alguien que nos hiciera el favor de cuidar a nuestras mascotas y cuidar la casa, y entonces mi hermana nos dijo que la suegra de ella lo haría. Llegó el gran día, y mi hermana nos dijo a dónde teníamos que llegar para encontrarnos con nuestro guía. A las diez de la noche llegamos al hotel, nuestro guía nos estaba esperando y comenzó a explicarnos todo lo que haríamos, por dónde pasaríamos y todo. Estaba muy nerviosa, tenía miedo, pero también feliz porque estaría junto a mi hermana.

Después, llegamos a la migración, nos dieron ropa limpia, cepillos, pasta dental, y también dónde bañarnos. Comimos: un jugo, una manzana, una galleta y un burrito, nos preguntaron por qué queríamos entrar a Estados Unidos, si teníamos algún familiar o alguien que nos recibiera, respondimos que sí y dimos los datos de mi hermana. Nos dijeron que esperaríamos nuevamente que nos hablaran cuando ya hubiesen hablado con ella. Nos separaron de mi padrastro, se lo llevaron a un lugar donde solo había hombres, y a mi mamá, mi hermanita y a mí nos llevaron a un lugar donde estaban todas las mujeres.

Esperamos ahí como unas cinco horas y nos llevaron de nuevo a hablar con un oficial de migración, él nos dijo que ya se habían comunicado con mi hermana y que ella ya había comprado los boletos. Debíamos estar listas para cuando saliera el bus que nos llevaría al refugio. Luego de media hora nos regresaron nuestras pertenencias y subimos al bus, llegamos a un refugio en Dallas, Texas, y ahí nos dieron chocolate y un sándwich y también nos regalaron ropa. Luego nos comunicamos con mi hermana y ella nos dijo que nos llevaran a otro

refugio en donde arreglaremos lo de los tickets de vuelo. Allí esperamos otra media hora, nos pusieron a hacer fila para subir al bus que nos llevaría al otro refugio y cuando llegamos al siguiente refugio hicieron pasar a mi mamá a un escritorio.

Después de eso nos llevaron a otro lugar en donde estaríamos, recuerdo que era como un parking, pero había muchas camas y personas que llevaban en ese lugar meses y nos dieron dos camas a mi familia y a mí, las camas no eran muy grandes, eran como camillas. Luego nos llevaron al comedor y ahí había un área de niños y tenían juegos de mesa, estaban los baños y la cafetería, nos dieron un sándwich, una manzana y agua. Luego de comer estuvimos haciendo llamada con mi hermana arreglando lo de los boletos y ya con eso listo fuimos al lugar donde nos imprimieron los boletos y ya nos dijeron a qué horas saldríamos de ahí para que nos llevaran al aeropuerto, también nos explicaron que íbamos a viajar en escala, primero llegaríamos a un lugar que no recuerdo el nombre y después de ahí tomaríamos otro vuelo para Washington D.C. y sí, así fue.

Cuando llegamos al aeropuerto, mis hermanas y mis cuñados nos estaban esperando, estaba muy feliz porque cuando mi hermana viajó para EE. EE. UU. pensé que nunca la iba a volver a ver, luego nos llevaron a un restaurante, en camino al restaurante yo iba viendo como era todo muy lindo, muy limpio, no estaba haciendo calor, pero tampoco frío, no sé, yo sentía como irreal todo. Llegamos al restaurante y comimos, nos tomamos muchas fotos, cuando terminamos mi hermana me dijo que nos llevaría a comprar ropa, luego llegamos a casa, nos dieron un cuarto que ya estaba amueblado, ahí estaríamos durmiendo mi mamá, mi padrastro, mi hermanita y yo solo por un tiempo porque nos mudaremos a una casa más grande. Después de unos días empecé a ir a la high school y al principio era raro porque no conocía a nadie, pero después me acostumbré y ahora se me hace un poco más fácil porque ya entiendo un poco más el idioma y ya tengo muchos amigos. Aprendí que adaptarse a un lugar nuevo lleva tiempo, pero siempre vale la pena intentarlo. Al final, me sentí feliz y orgullosa de no haberme rendido.

ALLISSON PEREYRA, GRADE 9

God's Plans

My name is Jeanette Pérez, and this is my story. My life changed when I left El Salvador to come to the United States. It was not easy. I remember the day I started my trip. I felt happy and sad at the same time, happy because I was going to see my dad and start a new life, and sad because I was leaving my country, my friends, and my family. I looked at the sky and thought, "Will I be happy in my new home?"

On the way, I saw many beautiful things. In Guatemala, I saw geese, birds, and rain. The rain was soft, and the air smelled fresh. I wanted to keep those memories forever. Then we passed through Mexico. Mexico was big and beautiful. I saw a deer looking at me. I wanted to touch them, but they ran away. They were so pretty. I also saw green trees and tropical places. But the trip was not always beautiful.

When I crossed the border into the United States, it was raining. There was a lot of mud. I saw the skulls of people and animals. That made me feel very sad and scared. I thought about the people who could not finish their journey. I prayed to arrive safely.

I arrived in the United States in September, and autumn was starting. The trees had many colors: red, yellow, and orange. I had never seen trees like that before. I fell in love with autumn, but it was also very cold. Later, winter came, and snow started to fall. I had never seen snow before. In El Salvador, there is no snow.

At first, I did not want to go outside. I miss my country. I missed the warm sun and my culture. I looked at the snow from the window. My dad told me, "Come outside." I said no at first, but one day I thought, "I am here now. I need to try." I went outside, and there was so much snow. My dad took some snow, made a ball, and threw it at me. I laughed. We played together. That day was special. Now I am waiting for winter because I love playing in the snow with my dad. I also played with my aunt and cousin. We made snowballs and laughed. It was a new and happy moment for me.

School here is different from school in El Salvador. In El Salvador, I wore a uniform and played outside during lunch. Here, everything is new. At first, it was hard because I did not understand English and I felt shy. But now I am learning. I have new friends, and I feel better every day.

I live with my dad. He is a great father and helps me with many things. We go out together, we eat, we talk, and we laugh. I am happy to be with him. He gives me strength when I feel sad.

The weather here is very different. In El Salvador, it is hot all year. Here, it snows. Now I like all the seasons. Autumn is beautiful with colorful trees. Winter is fun because of the snow. Summer is great because I go to parks and the beach. I eat ice cream and enjoy the sun. Every season feels special in its own way.

Now my life is different. My new home is nice. I go to school every day. I have traveled to other states like Washington, North Carolina, and Maryland. I am happy with my family. But in my heart, I will always love El Salvador. Sometimes I feel nostalgic. I remember my country, my friends, and my old house. I miss the warm days and the smell of the rain in El Salvador. But I know I am strong. I know this is my new life. I will never forget where I come from, and I will always keep my memories with love.

JEANETTE PEREZ, GRADE 9

Goodbye Mexico

Hi, my name is Randy Perez Perez, and I'm going to tell you how I said goodbye to my country, my family, friends, and culture thanks to a trip to Chicago in the United States. It was a wonderful trip because it changed our lives, leading us to a better future, both for my family. When I traveled from Mexico City to Chicago, I was 14 years old; this was in 2023. And to say goodbye, we took four days filled with valuable activities that I'll share with you below.

My parents always wanted me to study in Chicago because the schools there offered a higher quality of education. We left Mexico City because my father got a better job in Chicago. We had everything packed many days before leaving. I'll tell you about my farewell process day by day. On Thursday, my dad, my mom, two friends, my grandparents, and my aunts and uncles went to a fair to have a great time playing the games. We had a lot of fun; we spent three hours together, which I truly cherish. On Friday, everyone who had been with me the day before went to a special restaurant that makes delicious sushi. We all shared a meal and talked about saying goodbye, and we felt happy to be there, enjoying ourselves.

On Saturday, we embarked on a three-hour trip to the beach. Once again, my friends and family were with me, making this plan a reality. We swam in the sea, ran along the sand, watched the sunset, and I wanted to capture that moment in my memory. On Sunday, our last day of saying goodbye, we went to church to connect with our spiritual side, give thanks for our experiences, and pray for our trip and for everyone's well-being, even though we were separated by distance.

The day arrived, and we left our house for the last time, heading to Mexico City's airport. We boarded the plane and traveled four hours to Chicago in the United States. When we got off the plane, everything was very different. We left the airport and went to an apartment we had rented. That first night in a new and unfamiliar country was filled with sadness and a strange mix of emotions, knowing it was the first of many more nights to come, but hoping each one would be better than the last.

After these days we took to say goodbye, I learned many new things: that taking a trip changes your life, and that a few days with the people you love can be etched in your memory forever. I think that each day you learn how to do things you couldn't do before, and you improve everything about yourself.

La despedida de mi país

Hola, mi nombre es Randy Perez Perez y voy a contarles cómo me despedí de mi país, mi familia, amigos y cultura gracias a un viaje hacia Chicago en Estados Unidos. Un viaje muy lindo porque cambió nuestras vidas,

llevándonos a un mejor futuro, tanto para mí como para mi familia. Cuando viajé de la Ciudad de México a Chicago, tenía 14 años, esto fue en 2023. Y para decir adiós, nos tomamos cuatro días de valiosas actividades que les compartiré a continuación.

Mis padres siempre quisieron que yo estudiara en Chicago porque la escuela allí representaba una mejor calidad de enseñanza. Salimos de la Ciudad de México porque le dieron un mejor trabajo a mi padre en Chicago, teníamos todo empacado muchos días antes de partir. Les narraré día por día mi proceso de despedida. El día jueves, mi papá, mi mamá, dos amigos, mis abuelos y mis tíos fuimos a una feria para pasar un rato muy agradable en los juegos, nos divertimos mucho, fueron 3 horas que compartimos y que valoro mucho. El viernes todos quienes estuvimos el día anterior en el plan, esta vez fuimos a un restaurante especial, donde preparan un sushi delicioso, compartimos todos y hablamos sobre la despedida y nos sentíamos felices por poder estar allí disfrutando.

El sábado emprendimos un viaje de tres horas hasta la playa, nuevamente mis amigos y familiares se encontraban conmigo haciendo este plan. Nadamos en el mar, corrimos por la arena, vimos el atardecer y yo quise guardar ese momento en mi memoria. El domingo, ya último día de despedida, fuimos a la iglesia a conectar con nuestra parte espiritual, dar gracias por lo que vivimos y pedir por nuestro viaje y que todos estuviéramos bien, aunque separados por la distancia.

Llegó el día y salimos de nuestra casa por última vez hacia el aeropuerto de la Ciudad de México, subimos al avión y viajamos 4 horas desde allí hasta Chicago en Estados Unidos, cuando bajamos del avión todo era muy diferente. Salimos del aeropuerto y fuimos a un departamento que rentamos, esa primera noche en un país nuevo y desconocido la pasamos tristes y con una mezcla de sentimientos muy extraña, sabiendo que era la primera noche de muchísimas más que irían a llegar, pero con la esperanza de que cada una fuera mejor que la anterior.

Luego de estos días que tomamos para despedirnos aprendí muchas cosas nuevas, que tener un viaje te cambia la vida y que unos días al lado de las personas que quieres, pueden quedar grabados para siempre en la memoria y así pienso que cada día asimilas el cómo hacer cosas que antes no podías, y mejoras todo de ti.

RANDY PEREZ, GRADE 9

Flour on a Brick Wall

The air outside was cold. Rain thumped against the windows harshly, the sound of it constant and irritating. It could never decide what it wanted to be — there was a thunk, thunk, thunk, or a dink, dink, dink, and sometimes even a bloop, bloop, bloop. It made Gordon want to rip his hair out.

Gordon felt the chill in the air even in the warmth of the apartment. The windows were always cracked the slightest bit — not enough to visibly notice, but just enough to feel it. The black iron bars that were meant for the outside were on the inside of the home, and they weren't far enough apart for Gordon to stick his hands between the bars and shut the window.

His dull orange sweatshirt clung to him, just tight enough to be slightly uncomfortable. He grabbed the hem of it, hastily pulling it down over his hips. He pinched at the fabric on his biceps, too, trying to tug the sleeves in just the right way. Unfortunately, it wasn't only that. Everything was bothering him. It was the way his hair — that was more like a lion's mane — kept touching his neck, even if he pulled it up into a ponytail. It was the way that his beard was getting a little too long and the fact that his razor was broken, leaving him unable to take care of it.

It was the rain. It had to be.

And so he'd made the decision to try and make the best of it. The kitchen was a little small, but it was suitable enough to bake in. He knew that there was butter, sugar, salt, eggs, and flour. If he looked hard enough, he could find vanilla extract; it was never in the same place. He could make sugar cookies. Those were simple enough. If he felt like it, he could add sprinkles, too. The thought made him smile.

Thirty minutes after that, it looked as if a storm had whirled through the tiny kitchen. The black and white tiled floors were the cleanest part of the area. The brick walls somehow had gotten flour on them, and the marble counters were covered in eggshells and streaks of melted butter. The sink was too tiny for its own good, dishes piling up as if there were more than two bowls, a few spoons, and the cookie sheet.

Gordon looked down at himself. His blue apron was a mess, covered in flour, egg whites, and granulated sugar. The cookies had burnt — they weren't charred, but they were hard to bite down into. The rain continued to thud down against the windows and the walls. Gordon could hear it get heavier, and then a crack of thunder boomed.

He shuddered. His jaw twitched, and his hands curled into fists at his sides.

"Crap! I hate this stupid apartment!"

Without really thinking about it, he kicked the bottom of the fridge. His foot began to throb, and a small dent had formed in the cheap refrigerator. He kicked it again. And then he kicked it again, and again, and again.

"Stupid! Can't even close the window! What type of apartment keeps the bars on the inside? People are breaking in, not out! Rent is too high for how crappy this place is! I can't ever choose anything correctly!"

He pulled away from the fridge before he could break a toe. Instead, of course, he reached for the fake vines and fairy lights hanging from the cabinets above the sink. He ripped them down, and the lights softly clinked when they hit the ground.

"I hate this crap!"

Known for his unfortunate timing, Ben decided to come home from work. His keys jangled loudly in the door, and Gordon could see a pale hand worm its way inside to unhook the chains that were in the way. Ben slipped his way inside, carefully shutting the door as Gordon stood in the ruins of what was once their kitchen like a lost toddler.

Ben blinked. "Whoa," he said, monotone. "Did the storm make its way inside? I didn't know how to do that."

Rainwater was dripping off Ben's uniform. His heavy vest was soaked through, too — for how important his job was as a security guard, they didn't seem to allocate any of their funds towards his uniform.

Gordon didn't fret about that, for once. Instead, he grabbed a towel that was hanging off a stool in the kitchen, and he rushed over to shove it onto the floor where Ben was standing. He watched the towel soak up the water.

"You're getting water everywhere," he huffed. He took a deep breath, and he tried to push any shakiness out of his voice. "You know, there's a doormat outside for you to wipe your boots off on. It's brown, says welcome in big black letters. Did you miss it?"

"That's soaked through, too. It squished under my feet," Ben replied. He started kicking off his brown boots, the water having made them look almost black. "So, what happened to the kitchen? You're bein' real defensive."

Gordon shook his head, standing up to his full height. He hovered over Ben as he began to help take off the man's gear. "I've been cooped up all day. I guess I just... had it. I'll clean it up, so don't worry about that, I guess. Um... Yeah, no, don't worry."

Carefully, Gordon set Ben's vest on the ground. His hands went for Ben's tie, but Ben's hands grabbed his own. The man was so pale — he almost looked blue in comparison to how warm Gordon's tan skin was.

"It's fine," Ben muttered. "Let me dry up, and then I can..." He squinted at the fairy lights and fake vines on the ground. He looked back at Gordon. "I'll string the stuff back up and wipe down the counters. You can do the dishes."

And so that was what they did. Gordon took off his apron and set it in the hamper in his bedroom. He even changed his shirt, opting for a soft, loose t-shirt instead. It was much more comfortable against his skin. It was a simple solution to his earlier problem, and he was baffled that he hadn't thought of it earlier. Ben helped him pull his hair up high, a tight bun at the top of his head. He let Ben fix the lights and vines first and then started the dishes.

Ben was wiping down the counter, a spray bottle in one hand and a rag in the other. He was rambling about work, and Gordon only really listened to hear the sound of his voice. They fell into easy banter, easy laughter.

This is what this is supposed to be, Gordon thought. The bars on the windows didn't matter. The fact that their apartment was small and poorly maintained didn't matter. He was with his person. He could change his shirt if it bothered him, and he could find ways to fix his unruly hair.

Burnt sugar cookies were still pretty tasty sugar cookies, too.

ADRIAN RAMOS, GRADE II

Success is Very Difficult

My name is Julia Yessenia Recinos, but I prefer to be called Yuli. I'm from Guatemala, specifically Quetzaltenango (Xela). I'm 18 years old and a sophomore. In this text, I wanted to express the difficulties that can happen on the path to success, sharing examples and personal experiences that have helped me understand that every reward comes with sacrifices.

When I was little, the people I lived with taught me to be very responsible. From a young age, I have always had many dreams. An aunt I lived with in kindergarten taught me that before asking permission to go out and play, I always had to do my homework.

In fourth grade, I started doing my homework and everything on my own. It was always difficult because, as time went on, things got more complicated, since my aunt kept demanding better grades. My grades were between 80 and 90, but she wanted me to get 100s. I couldn't go out to play anymore because she wanted me to study almost all the time. At the end of seventh grade, I had to take an entrance exam to get into the high school they wanted me to attend. Honestly, I didn't want to study there. It was not for a bad reason, but I just didn't want to because I knew I had to take the exam and study even more. Things got more complicated as the exam approached, and luckily, I passed with a very good grade. But I realized that I wasn't studying because I enjoyed it anymore, but to please my aunt and uncle. Studying became harder as I wasn't doing anything I liked anymore. I was only doing it to make them happy. This was a time when my grades dropped, and I failed ninth grade, and they treated me terribly. After a while, I went to live with my older sister and repeated ninth grade, but unfortunately, I failed again. I felt very disappointed in myself for failing a second time. By the time I found out, I was already living here in the United States with my mother and her husband. My mother scolded me but told me that everything would be new here and that I could do better.

When I enrolled in school in Virginia, I was so excited to start over. On the first day of class, I was incredibly nervous, but a girl spoke to me, and from that day on, she became one of my best friends. Her name is Lauren. The first two months passed, and my mother asked me how I was doing with English. I told her I was doing well, as I was learning and understanding much better than when I didn't know any English at all.

Eventually, I received awards in some classes. This really motivated me to keep improving; I was happy. However, my mother started telling me to speak English when we went to the store because that is what school was for. She believed the awards were useless if I didn't practice English at home. But I don't practice at home because I'm afraid my mother will scold me for not pronouncing a word correctly. My mother puts a lot of pressure on me, and I understand why, but I do what I can.

After a while, my older sister, Gaby, came to live with us. She is my biggest supporter. She's like a sister/mother to me. Since she's been living with us, Gaby has supported me unconditionally. I tell her everything, and she gives me advice. If something isn't right, she tells me. I trust her completely. It's wonderful to have my sister back by my side. I missed her terribly during the time we were apart. I called her every day to tell her everything that was happening to me. Now, when I study, I only do it so my mom sees the good grades, not because it makes me happy. Most of the time, I don't do the things I enjoy. My mom wants me to graduate,

and I appreciate that, but she pressures me to have a diploma hanging on the wall, since my siblings couldn't achieve that due to various difficulties.

My mother won't let me get a bad grade because she always says she'll punish me. However, I think she should understand me, since even the most upright person can make mistakes. I'm forbidden from failing any subject because, according to her, studying is the only thing I should be doing. And she's right, but she doesn't realize how difficult it is for me to study at a school where the classes aren't even in my language. She hasn't even bothered to ask me what I think of school. When I want to talk to her, she doesn't let me finish explaining things; she just scolds me. One of the few times I've done something I've enjoyed was last year when I joined the soccer team. I joined because my sister encouraged me. She told me that if I liked it, I had to do everything I could to achieve it. When I walked in, I felt incredibly happy; it was an incomparable feeling. When I got home, I told my family, but no one hugged me or congratulated me, only my two brothers and my boyfriend. Something I longed for at every game was for my mother to come and watch me play. However, she only came twice all season, and every time I asked her if she'd come to the next game, her answer was always, "Why go see a team that's always going to lose?" That answer hurt me a lot, especially since I saw that most of my teammates had their parents' support. I realize that everything I do is to make others happy and satisfied, since it's the only time I get praised for anything, but I don't feel happy myself. As I said at the beginning, every success has its difficulties, but unfortunately, right now, for me, success means the happiness of others. "Don't forget that your happiness matters too."

Qué difícil es el éxito

Me llamo Julia Yessenia Recinos, me gusta que me llamen Yuli, soy de Guatemala, exactamente de Quetzaltenango Xela, tengo 18 años y soy estudiante del grado 10. He querido expresar en este escrito las dificultades que pueden surgir en el camino al éxito, dando ejemplos y experiencias personales que me han ayudado a entender que toda recompensa tiene sus sacrificios.

Cuando yo era pequeña, las personas con las que viví me enseñaron a ser una niña muy responsable, desde pequeña siempre fui alguien con muchos sueños, una tía con la que viví cuando estudiaba en el kínder me enseñó que antes de yo poder pedir permiso para salir a jugar siempre tenía que hacer mi tarea primero.

En el cuarto grado de primaria yo empecé a hacer mis tareas y todo sola, siempre me costó porque conforme pasaba el tiempo todas las cosas empezaron a ser más difíciles para mí, ya que mi tía cada vez me exigía mejores notas. Mis notas eran de 80 a 90, pero ella quería que yo tuviera notas de 100, yo ya no podía salir a jugar porque ella me quería tener estudiando la mayor parte del tiempo. Cuando pasé a séptimo grado tenía que hacer un examen de admisión para poder entrar al instituto donde ellos querían que entrara, la verdad yo no quería estudiar en ese instituto, no por nada malo, simplemente no quería ya que sabía que tenía que hacer el examen y tenía que estudiar mucho más, las cosas se me empezaron a complicar ya que ese examen se acercaba cada día más y por suerte lo logré pasar con muy buena nota, pero me fui dando cuenta que yo ya no estudiaba porque me gustara sino para que mis tíos se sintieran satisfechos, estudiar cada vez me pesaba más, yo no hacía ya nada que me gustara sólo lo hacía para que ellos estuvieran felices. Hubo un tiempo donde bajé mis notas y reprobé el grado noveno y entonces ellos me trataron súper mal. Después de un tiempo me fui a vivir con mi hermana mayor y repetí el noveno grado, pero lastimosamente lo volví a reprobar. Me sentí decepcionada de mí misma por el hecho de reprobar por segunda vez. Cuando me enteré de la situación yo ya estaba viviendo aquí en Estados Unidos con mi mamá y su esposo, mi mamá me regañó, pero me dijo que aquí todo iba a ser nuevo y que yo podía mejorar.

Cuando me inscribieron a la escuela en Virginia estaba super emocionada de comenzar de nuevo, mi primer día de clases, yo estaba super nerviosa, pero hubo una chica que me habló y desde ese día, ella se volvió de mis

mejores amigas ella se llama 'Lauren'. pasaron los primeros dos meses y mi madre me dijo que cómo iba mi inglés, le dije que bien, ya que estaba aprendiendo y lo entendía más que al principio, ya que yo no sabía hablar nada de inglés, conforme fue pasando el tiempo por parte de la escuela me dieron reconocimientos en algunas clases. La verdad eso me hacía querer seguir avanzando, era feliz, sin embargo, mi madre ya me empezó a decir cuando íbamos a la tienda que hablara en inglés, que por eso estaba en la escuela, que los reconocimientos que me daban de qué servían si yo no practicaba inglés en casa, pero en casa no lo practico porque tengo el miedo de que mi madre me regañe por no decir una palabra correctamente, mi madre me pone presión, la entiendo, pero yo hago mi mayor esfuerzo. Después de un tiempo mi hermana mayor Gaby se vino a vivir con nosotros, ella para mí es mi mayor apoyo, ella es como una hermana/madre, desde que vive con nosotros, ella me apoya incondicionalmente. A ella le cuento todo, ella me aconseja, si algo no está bien me lo dice, a ella le tengo mucha confianza, es lindo tener a mi hermana de nuevo a mi lado, el tiempo que estuvimos lejos la extrañé demasiado, la llamaba todos los días para contarle todo lo que me pasaba. Al estudiar, ahora solo lo hago porque mi mamá mira las buenas notas, no porque yo me sienta feliz, la mayoría de las veces no hago las cosas que me gustan, mi madre quiere que yo me gradúe y se lo agradezco, pero ella recarga en mí el peso de poner un diploma en la pared ya que mis hermanos no lo pudieron lograr por distintas dificultades.

Mi madre no me deja sacar una nota mal porque siempre me dice que me va a castigar. Sin embargo, siento que ella debería de comprenderme ya que hasta la persona más correcta puede cometer un error. Tengo prohibido sacar una "F" en cualquier clase ya que estudiar es lo único que tengo que hacer, según el pensamiento de mi madre. Y tiene razón, pero ella no se da cuenta de lo difícil que es para mí, estudiar en una escuela donde las clases no son en mi idioma natal inclusive, ni el tiempo se ha tomado de preguntarme cómo me siento en la escuela, cuando quiero hablar con ella no me deja terminar de contar las cosas, simplemente me regaña. De las únicas veces que hice algo que me gustó fue cuando el año pasado entré al equipo de soccer y entré porque mi hermana me dio su apoyo, me dijo que si a mí me gustaba tenía que hacer lo posible por lograrlo, cuando entré me sentí super feliz, era una emoción inigualable, al llegar a casa les conté a mi familia, sin embargo, nadie me dio un abrazo ni me felicitó, solo mis dos hermanos y mi novio. Algo que yo deseaba en cada partido era que mi madre me fuera a ver, sin embargo, en toda la temporada solo fue a verme dos veces y cuando yo le preguntaba si iría a verme al próximo partido, su respuesta siempre fue para que fuera a ver un equipo que siempre va a perder. Me dolió mucho esa respuesta, ya que miraba que la mayoría de mis compañeras de equipo, sus padres estaban apoyándolas. Me doy cuenta de que todo lo que hago es para que los demás se sientan contentos y satisfechos ya que es el único momento donde ellos me felicitan por hacer algo, sin embargo, yo no me siento feliz. Como dije al principio, todo éxito tiene sus dificultades, pero lastimosamente en este momento, para mí el éxito significa la felicidad ajena. "No olvides que tu felicidad también importa."

JULIA YESSSENIA RECINOS, GRADE 10

My Journey to the U.S.A

In Pakistan, I liked my school very much. It was very big, and I had nice teachers. I lived in a place called K.P.K. My town was big and had many shops and restaurants. I had many friends in Pakistan, and I miss them a lot. I also had one very special person in my life. When I was leaving, my friends were crying for me, and they were very sad. I spent most of my time with them, so it was very hard to say goodbye.

I flew to the U.S.A. to be with my family. I felt very sad to leave my country because when I saw my friends crying, I couldn't control my emotions. When I arrived in the U.S.A., I thought it was nice and that the people were friendly. The U.S.A. has many beautiful places. There are also many rules and regulations here. Driving cars has many rules, and it is hard for me to understand them. There are people from many different countries living here.

My new school is very big, and the teachers are nice. I don't have friends yet because this is my first school in the U.S.A., but I hope to make some soon. The school is close to my house, so I can walk there every day. Even though moving here has been difficult, and I miss my friends in Pakistan, I am trying to get used to my new life and stay strong for my family's sake.

ABDUL REHMAN, GRADE 10

I am Poem

I am a boy who loves to ride bicycles and play soccer.
I wonder how plants grow.
I hear a ball screaming as I kick it into the goal.
I see plants dancing during the day.
I want a new phone.
I am a boy who loves to ride bicycles and play soccer.

I pretend I have a black BMW.
I feel happy riding a bike.
I touch the moon.
I worry about getting into trouble for coming to school late.
I cry when my bike is broken.
I am a boy who loves to ride bicycles and play soccer.

I understand life is hard.
I say that I'm good at riding a bike.
I dream about having a car.
I try to be good at soccer.
I hope to have a better bike someday.
I am a boy who loves to ride bicycles and play soccer.

ALEXIS SANTOS, GRADE 9

My Vanity

I want to tell you about my vanity. My vanity is made of wood, and it is white with light bulbs around the mirror. On top of my vanity, I have perfumes that I use almost every day. On the side, it has a plug so I can charge my phone. I got this vanity from my parents as a gift when we moved into our new house. I received it in July of 2025.

I usually keep the vanity in front of my bed. My vanity is very special to me because it came from my parents. When I look at it, I remember them and feel very grateful for the gift they gave me. I will keep my vanity for as long as I can because, as I said, it was a gift from my parents, and it means a lot to me.

GENESIS SAUCEDA, GRADE 9

I am Poem

I am a guy who loves tattoos and playing soccer at night
I wonder what will happen in my future
I listen to music every day
I see my friends in school every day

I want to study medicine and be the best neurologist
 I am a guy who loves tattoos and playing soccer at night

 I am a guy who loves tattoos and playing soccer at night
 I pretend to help too many people
 I feel that I'm a good person
 I touch my phone every day
 I worry if I will be a good student and pass my classes
 I cry for nothing
 I am a guy who loves tattoos and playing soccer at night

 I am a guy who loves tattoos and playing soccer at night
 I understand the Spanish language very well
 I say that life goes on
 I dream of being a good doctor and helping many people
 I try to be a better person every day
 I hope to achieve all my dreams
 I am a guy who loves tattoos and playing soccer at night

ERICK SERNA, GRADE II

Graffiti

I am very good at drawing graffiti and characters. To start, you just have to grab a piece of paper or use a notebook and a pencil, a mechanical pencil, or a pen, whichever you prefer. First, you search for what you want to draw or think of it in your head. Next, you can trace it by putting the paper on top of your phone or computer. Make sure you brighten your screen so you can see your inspiration and then draw it. Or you can try to draw it freehand.

Then you can either leave it with no color or color it. You can color inside, or if you want, you can choose any color and trace around your graffiti. And voilà, an amazing graffiti drawing.

For the characters, you can copy from another person who created the character, or you can make your own. I would start with the pose. You can make the character crouch or lean on something or draw them close, so you don't have to draw the legs. But use the arms, because the character will look boring without them. You can also try perspective. Draw a circle, add curves, draw on top of it, then erase the extra lines and draw what you really want. Finally, you can show your drawing to your parents or your friends.

SAMUEL SOSA, GRADE 9

I am Poem

I am a beautiful girl and very intelligent.
 I wonder what lies at the bottom of the ocean.
 I hear the waves whispering as they crash across the sea.
 I see the dolphins and whales smiling and playing.
 I want to explore the sea and its surroundings.
 I am a beautiful girl and very intelligent.

 I pretend to sleep from time to time.
 I feel peaceful when I imagine floating on the ocean.

I touch the soft sand beneath the waves.
I worry that the world may lose its beauty.
I cry when people hurt animals or nature.
I am a beautiful girl and very intelligent.

ELDA TISTOJ, GRADE 10

The Bar

Warning: Mature Content

The bar was a run-down old thing, shoved in the corner of an alley. It was squashed between street vendors and people who sold off-market pain medication to addicts. The walls were an unassuming stripped brick, covered in a mess of chipped graffiti that someone had at least made an attempt to scrub away. The faded tags and phallic spray paint almost looked like a mural from far away. The bright colored lights buzzed and popped with the strain of staying alive under the unpaid bills. The pungent smell of alcohol clung to the walls.

A man covered in oily blisters was slouched against the wall, beggar's tin having slipped from weathered fingers. It had outside seating at some point, but the chairs had long since been stolen from negligent eyes. There was a scattering of slovenly patrons crouched on crates, languishing on unwashed bolted-down tables, and cracking open beer bottles while cross-legged on the pavement. The customers were distinguishable from the staff just barely, their alcohol-stained overcoats and overgrown hair hid scabbed-over hands and hunger-set eyes. A mousy bartender was asleep behind the bar, hat drooping over her eyes and a cleaning rag haphazardly acting as a pillow.

Misha sipped his drink as he waited. He didn't recognize what was in it, something citrus at the very least. The strong concoction of flavors was overpowering. It could very well be arsenic, and he wouldn't be able to notice. It was numbing in a way. He took another drink of it. A —comparatively— well-groomed older woman from the booth over tilted her chin and gave him a sultry wink, and he averted his coal-dark eyes uncomfortably.

A couple of minutes passed, and Misha startled at the sudden pressure on his thin shoulder. Turning, he made eye contact with a personable brown-haired man. His wide gold eyes creased up at the ends like he was indefinitely part of a one-man inside joke.

"Misha, what a pleasure."

"You're late. Again," Misha replied with a pinch to his brow. "By twenty-three minutes. You said you'd stop doing that."

"You know someone like me gets held up quite a bit; you're not my only customer," Rohan said playfully, sitting on the table next to Misha's drink. [He] leaned over to take a sip, but Misha slapped his hand away.

"We're still here for business, Ro," he warned irritably.

"Fine," Rohan said with a pout, stretching his gloved hand as if he'd never reached for the drink.

"Did you get what I asked for?" Misha prompted, leaning forward with his dark fingers clasped together. He found it ironic that while he had well-kept but cheap clothes,

Rohan seemed to have stopped caring about washing his silk shirt years ago. It was almost insulting. "Would I be here if I didn't?" He kicked his feet up as he spoke, taking up the rest of the discolored table and causing Misha's drink to shiver from the movement.

"I'd hope not," Misha told him pointedly, snatching his gin off the shaky wooden surface.

Rohan rolled his eyes good-naturedly, "Yeah, I got it for you, kid. The person you're looking for is Lohn Hald. She's arriving in town tomorrow. She always stops at Marlene's after being at sea; you can find her there."

"Thank you," Misha said shortly, passing the brunette the rest of his drink and shooting him a grateful look.

"Tell her to put it on my tab," he said with a wave in the bartender's direction.

"You're leaving already?" Rohan asked, startled into sitting up, leather boots scuffing the varnish.

Misha muttered a vague excuse before quickly ducking out of the bar, nails pricking his palm from clenching a fist to his loose waistcoat. Lohn Hald, Marlene's tomorrow. He can work with that.

ADELINE WEHNER, GRADE 12

Two Beautiful Countries

I have been to many countries, and they were all beautiful, but I will compare two countries in terms of weather, nature, and animals. I will compare the United States and Turkey.

Turkey and America have almost the same climate, but the weather in Turkey is quite hot in the summer. America is better in some ways, but in the winter, it is much colder than Turkey. As for natural beauty, both countries are beautiful, but when I think of nature, the first place that comes to mind is Virginia because there are trees everywhere. The colorful trees toward the end of spring are so beautiful. It's fascinating to see all the different colors.

As for animals, in Turkey, I mostly saw cats and dogs because they are all outside. Other than that, I didn't see many different animals. But in America, I have seen many animals I had never seen before. I really like the less common animals, and sometimes I even want to chase after them just to see them closer.

My name is Mubin, and I joined the Prince William Soccer Team. At first, English was a big challenge, which meant my teammates couldn't understand what I was saying, and I couldn't understand them either. But I learned that language is not always required to connect. At my first training session, I caught the ball, slipped excitedly, and hit my head on the crossbar. My teammates couldn't stop laughing, so I joked and said, "Yeah, that's my new goal tactic." Later, when I tried to take a shot, I accidentally kicked the ball toward my friend's friend, who jumped up and down. We all burst out laughing.

Even though we didn't share the same language, I communicated by pointing, passing the ball, making jokes, and using facial expressions. I would say, "Pass right here," while pointing and showing my runs. Somewhere along the way, even with my mistakes, I scored a small goal. Everyone applauded, and the coach laughed and said, "Mubin, even though you don't speak much English, your chemistry on the field is amazing." That was one of the happiest days of my life.

The cultures and cuisines of different countries are very different from each other. Afghan food is very good, and everyone loves it. Since we are Muslim, we don't eat pork or gelatin. Turkish food is also very good and different in its own way. Every time I tried it, I thought, "Wow, this is so good." Since Turkey is a Muslim country, there was no pork or gelatin there either.

In the United States, the food is different. I feel like America doesn't have just one type of food because there are foods from many cultures. But many places sell fast food, and a lot of it has pork or gelatin. Sometimes it is hard for us to buy food outside because we have to check what is inside it. That is what I have discovered so far. If I discover more, I will write about it.

I was born in Afghanistan and lived there for eight years. I have wonderful memories with my relatives and family. Then one day, my parents decided we would move to Turkey, and everything changed. When we first arrived in Turkey, I didn't like it very much. But after a few days, I started to love it. I began school about a month later, even though I didn't know Turkish. I learned it little by little each day. Soon, I made friends and had a lot of fun.

Then I started high school. My first year was very difficult, but I made a friend who helped me a lot. Thanks to him, I improved my grades and passed my classes. Later, my parents made plans to move to America. We prepared within a month, and the day of our departure arrived. I was very worried. I wondered how I would survive an 11-hour flight, but we did it.

When we arrived in Virginia, I really liked it. For three months, we traveled and explored, and I liked everything about it. After that, I started school again. It was very different from the schools in the other countries I had lived in, but I am slowly getting used to it.

ABDUL YARZADA, GRADE 9

A Difficult but Beautiful Life

Hello, I am Abdul Mubin Yarzada, and my story is about moving from Turkey to America. We moved from Turkey to America with my family 6 months ago, and everything has been fine and good since then.

The moment we got off the plane was very nice and very different from Turkey. That day, my cousins picked us up from Dulles International Airport, and we stayed at their house for 3 months and had a lot of fun. After those 3 months, we rented a house with our family and started living there.

When we rented a house for ourselves, I was going to the market alone every day. My English wasn't very good, and I was scared, and I was bored sitting at home all the time.

After 10 days, I joined the soccer club and started going there 3 days a week, and I was having a lot of fun. After 1 month, I started going to my school, and I had even more fun, and I was happy because life was going the way I wanted.

I didn't know that America was such a good and developed country, and I am thankful that I came here because it was for my studies, for my siblings, and for my mother and father, because in this country, one can do whatever one wants.

Zor Ama Guzel Bir Hayat

Merhaba, ben Abdul Mubin Yarzada ve hikayem Türkiye'den Amerika'ya taşınma ile ilgili: 6 ay önce ailemle birlikte Türkiye'den Amerika'ya taşındık ve o zamandan beri her şey yolunda ve güzel.

Uçaktan indiğimiz an çok güzeldi ve Türkiye'den çok farklıydı. O gün kuzenlerim bizi Dulles Uluslararası Havaalanından aldı ve 3 ay boyunca onların evinde kalıp çok eğlendik. Bu 3 ayın ardından ailemle bir ev kiraladık ve orada yaşamaya başladık.

Kendimize bir ev kiraladığımızda, her gün pazara tek başıma gidiyordum. İngilizcem pek iyi değildi ve korkuyordum. Ayrıca her gün evde oturmaktan sıkılıyordum.

10 gün sonra futbol kulübüne katıldım ve haftada 3 gün oraya gitmeye başladım ve çok eğleniyordum. 1 ay sonra okula gitmeye başladım ve daha da çok eğleniyordum ve mutluydum çünkü hayat istediğim gibi gidiyordu.

Amerika'nın bu kadar iyi ve gelişmiş bir ülke olduğunu bilmiyordum ve buraya geldiğim için minnettarım, çünkü buraya gelmemin sebebi eğitimim, kardeşlerim ve annemle babam içindi, çünkü bu ülkede insan istediğini yapabiliyor.

MUBIN YARZADA, GRADE 9

Baked with Mom's Love

My name is Jessica, and one of my best memories is the day I made a cake with my mom. We were in my kitchen, surrounded by all the ingredients, haha. This happened three months ago, on a Monday evening. This story is about how my mom taught me how to prepare, bake, and decorate a cake.

The first thing we did was gather all the ingredients we needed, like flour, eggs, sugar, and butter. My mom was with me, patiently telling me step by step how to mix the ingredients and the necessary amounts. While we were preparing everything, I felt happy because it reminded me of when I was little and I would help her, or at least I thought I was a big help. I also felt joyful to be sharing that moment with my mom.

After preparing all the ingredients, we started mixing them very carefully. I followed my mom's instructions as she showed me how to do it correctly. We greased the pan, poured in the batter, and put it in the oven. While the cake was baked, we waited patiently, and as time passed, the house filled with a delicious aroma that made me eager for it to come out so I could eat.

When the cake was ready, we took it out and let it cool. Once it was cool, we started decorating it with whipped cream, fruit, and colorful sprinkles. After finishing, we put it in a serving dish and placed it on the table (it looked so cute and delicious). Finally, my mom and I each served ourselves a slice, tasted it, and loved it. At that moment, I felt happy because I hadn't just made a cake with my mom; we had also created a new memory.

That day I learned that cooking with someone you love can be more special. I realized that the most important thing wasn't making the cake, but the time I shared with my mom. In the end, I felt happy and grateful because I learned something new and experienced an unforgettable moment with her.

Horneado con amor de Mamá

Me llamo Jessica, y uno de mis mejores recuerdos es el día que hice un pastel con mi mamá. Estábamos en la cocina de mi casa rodeadas de todos los ingredientes jajaja, esto ocurrió hace tres meses atrás un lunes en la tarde noche. Esta historia trata sobre cómo mi mamá me enseñó a preparar, hornear y decorar un pastel.

Lo primero que hicimos fue reunir todos los ingredientes que necesitábamos como harina, huevo, azúcar, y mantequilla. Mi mamá estaba conmigo diciéndome paso a paso con mucha paciencia cómo mezclar los ingredientes y las cantidades necesarias, mientras preparábamos todo, yo me sentía feliz porque me acordaba cuando estaba chiquita y le ayudaba a hacerlo, o eso creía yo, que era de mucha ayuda. También sentía alegría por estar compartiendo ese momento al lado de mi mamá.

Después de preparar todos los ingredientes, empezamos a mezclarlos con mucho cuidado. Yo seguía las instrucciones de mi mamá mientras ella me iba enseñando cómo hacerlo correctamente, engrasamos el molde, vertimos la mezcla y la pusimos en el horno, mientras el pastel se horneaba esperamos con mucha paciencia, y entre más pasaba el tiempo la casa se iba llenando de un olor delicioso que me hizo sentir ansiosa porque ya saliera y poder comer.

Cuando el pastel estuvo listo lo sacamos y dejamos que se enfriara, una vez que ya estaba frío lo empezamos a decorar con crema batida, frutas y chispas de colores. Después de terminarlo lo pusimos en un recipiente y lo colocamos en la mesa (se veía súper lindo y sabroso), finalmente mi mamá y yo nos servimos una rebanada, lo probamos y nos encantó. En ese momento me sentí feliz porque no solo hice un pastel con mi mamá, sino que también hicimos un nuevo recuerdo.

Ese día aprendí que cocinar con alguien que amas puede ser más especial, me di cuenta de que lo más importante no fue hacer el pastel sino el tiempo que compartí con mi mamá, al final me sentí feliz y agradecida, porque aprendí algo nuevo y viví un momento inolvidable con ella.

JESSICA YEBRA, GRADE 10

Shirley Heim Middle School

*Jenny Davis, Reading Specialist;
Lyric McVoy, English 8 Teacher
Nancy Sindle, Innovative Learning Coach
Chelsea Warrington, Librarian*

Time, Unmoving

Time is the weight I never set,
It bends my days with quiet debt.
I spend it fast, I save it slow,
I still owe it more than I can know.

It slips though hours I try to keep,
It wakes me soft when I should sleep.
I try to leave, to outpace why
It doesn't move, it lets me try,

No chase, no sound, no need to see
Time stays, and waits, and outlasts me.
It lingers in the spaces small.
The corners of my life and all.

DENZIL ADARKWA, GRADE 8

LIFE

Everyone starts young
People are born every day
Then the journey starts

People make mistakes
But then people learn from them
Try not to repeat

Age into adults
Everyone's life has meaning
But it's up to you

AARON DIXON, GRADE 6

Is life hard?

If I said yes or no I would be lying,
Because at times you might want to quit,
You'll want to scream, you'll want to cry,
you'll want to break things,
you might even hate life,
you might hate the people,
you might not want to be here..
..But at times, you'll want to laugh,
you'll want to smile,

you'll want to stay out with friends or yourself longer,
you'll want to watch the sun set or even rise,
but you might miss those moments after they pass, but you won't regret them,
you'll love yourself for remembering every fun memory you had,
you might even be thankful for the bad days,
for teaching you patience, or who your real friends are,
maybe even for helping you understand how or what others might feel.
What I'm trying to say, is, life is hard,
maybe even painful, but it can also be easy and fun as well.

Life is never always a dream,
but never always a nightmare.

SAGE LYNCH, GRADE 7

Growing

I learned that growing doesn't always
feel like blooming
sometimes it feels like shedding
quietly, without witnesses

but even what falls away
once kept me alive
and I thank it
before I move on

JUAN MARTINEZ FIGUEROA, GRADE 8

Loss Collects its Dimes

There's an indescribable feeling
understood by life and death,
no use in trying to find the words,
you'd better hold your breath.

There's many reasons one would feel,
this deep, deranged emotion.
But if you're suddenly alone and blue,
There must've been commotion.

This feeling's quite the nuisance,
showing up at awful times,
when life bruises, then death takes,
and loss collects its dimes.

You never know your final wish,
your final memory,
fishing at the family pond,
or pinecones by a tree.

The strolls around our hardworked land,
the days when you were strong,
the long naps taken just to heal-
I hoped my ears were wrong.

The races 'round the family house,
the windchimes' fragile chime,
watching out for fire ants,
as loss collects its dimes.

As I packed for a surprise trip,
headed down to Mississippi,
I heard the most unfortunate news-
and suddenly, I was dizzy.

The trip down there was silent,
other than the muffled whimpers,
arriving there was really hard,
every breath shook, full of shivers.
The service was mournful, melancholy,
striking stories of his pastime,
rewatching all these memories,
as loss collects its dimes.

Loss, the feeling of losing others,
and perhaps, even yourself,
the moments you never thought would be the last,
until the photo's on the shelf.

Loss has been around since the beginning,
causing chaos and some tears,
breaking hearts and creating disputes,
cutting me open for years.

Going back to the farm is painful,
I miss you so much it should be a crime,
I cry and hope to see you again-
but loss collected its dimes.

AMELIA MCLEOD, GRADE 8

The Little Things We Shared

Friendship is a light that never burns out,
a quiet kind of strength you never have to talk about.
It lives in every laugh, every tear we let show,
in the way you made the hard days feel a little less heavy to hold.
I won't forget the hugs when I felt small,
or laughing so hard we couldn't breathe at all.
The late-night calls that somehow never had an end,

talking about nothing — and everything — with my best friend.
 The mornings we'd get ready on the phone,
 showing outfits and messy hair.
 I won't forget the jokes no one else understood,
 the stories that never stopped being good.
 The afternoons spent playing games
 laughing off our awful aims
 Summer days at the pool, walking with a drink in our hand,
 tripping on cracks like it was all planned.
 The comfortable quiet where no words were needed,
 the dumb little pranks that had me defeated.
 Blue lollipops, trying to hide the stain,
 and turning the smallest moments into something we'd replay.
 The competitions we swore were serious stuff,
 even when trying our best was always enough.
 The plans we made that never came true
 funny how dreaming them still felt like we'd been there too.
 The "good morning" texts, the "good night" replies,
 long calls filled with dreams and tired sighs.
 Especially the silly photos we'd take,
 and the first time we met — not knowing the difference you'd make.
 You had a way of bringing the best out of me,
 showing me parts of myself I didn't always see.
 I'll carry every moment, the loud and the small,
 because losing distance doesn't mean losing it all.
 Even if life pulls us onto different roads,
 you're a part of my story — that much I know.
 That's what best friends do.
 They stay with you, even when they're not right next to you.
 And no matter where life decides to bend,
 I'll always be grateful I got to call you my friend.

KENSIE MCLEOD, GRADE 8

My Family

My family is important to me because they help me no matter what. What makes my family special is that on my mom's side of the family they are from Colombia and on my dad's side of the family they are from America. My family is amazing and they help me when I feel low. When I visit my mom's side of the family in Colombia I experience food, music, and people. It's a good opportunity to work on my Spanish. The best part about my family is that they know me better than anyone. I love my family and I am happy that I have them in my life and I'm excited for all the things we will do together.

VICTORIA POTRAFKA, GRADE 7

Lost in a Thought

Time comes and goes, hearing the chimes move and sway
 You forget it's a gift that can be taken away.

Love of a family, grows stronger through this
But time gets weaker, feeling the pulse fade day by day.
Lost in a thought forgetting to rush and suddenly you lose it all
Remembering it as you fall
You get deeper in this hole wondering where it all went
Asking questions to fix the dent
Picking yourself up becomes a challenge but not lost
You become a new version knowing time is not ending
Hearing words of lost ones leads to pain
Going out to see sun, but begins to rain
You know you're not yourself but you push forward
Remembering my loved ones through this
You get so focused you become lost in a thought
Nevertheless you push forward without a fraught
Now you're older wondering where it all went
Seeing it go by as if it was in a rush
You live on and go as a Disciple
Now it's your time leading to a cycle.

DANIEL RUIZ, GRADE 8

Past Memory

My body moves in between my mom and dad as I spread out on top of them. My head in my
moms lap and my legs on top of my dads lap.

My father puts his hand gently on my leg, while my moms hand goes to my hair untangling
the small knots made due to me sleeping.

I let my mind go fuzzy, as the smell of a sweet candle that had a hint of a dog stench hit my
nose. The comforting smell of home.

The TV plays a drama show, my moms choice. Mother sips her coffee and dad just sits there
paying attention to his phone.

Time comes and goes as I lay there, before I slowly feel my body awaken and my eyes flutter
open. I feel my dads comforting presence.

My hand moves to my eyes and rubs as I adjust to the bright, but gentle and warm sunlight
that hits my face. I don't move from my spot.

My eyes open completely as I start to wake up and begin leaving that special place, I didn't
want to. I wanted to stay.

I wished to go back. To lay on top of my mom and dad as they let their morning routine on
the weekends unfold.

When the nights ever get harsh and cold, I force my mind to go back to that place. Even just
for a moment of peace again.

ISABELLA SWEENEY, GRADE 8

Footsteps

Someday, all we know will be gone.
All our footprints erased by the rain,
even our memories thinning
with the passage of time.

But as skin begins to wrinkle
and the timer nears its end,
there is little left to do but look back
longing to see them once more,
all of us full of life again.

I recognize I still have time,
that I haven't reached it yet,
and still, it slips through my fingers.

Is it the song fading
at the end of the hallway?
Or the sunset
sliding off the walls?

I've taken it all for granted,
though there is still so much to see.
Maybe if I stop gluing myself to the screen,
or wake before the afternoon passes me by,
perhaps if I spent less time counting myself
and more time truly living.

Maybe then I'd feel
as if there were more sand
in the hourglass.

So before the candle burns down to its wick,
make use of what you have,
because she is only a page
with a few lines left to write.

She has always been the footsteps behind me in the race,
the ones I never knew were there.

ZAINAB WALI ZALMAY, GRADE 8

Ocean Creatures

One cool thing about me is my passion for underwater animals. I know a lot about many different kinds of aquatic animals. Three of my favorites that I'll be talking about are, the Vampire squid, the mimic octopus, and the sea krait.

Starting with the mimic octopus. Its scientific name is *Thaumoctopus mimicus*. The mimic octopus is exactly like it sounds: it is an octopus that uses chromatophores to disguise itself; chromatophores are what

many fish, reptiles, and amphibians use to produce the color they are. What is unique about this creature is it uses its ability to change colors to attract prey. It is found in the Indo-Pacific region.

Next is the Vampire squid. Its scientific name is *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* which means "Vampire squid from hell". It is found in temperate and tropical oceans at extremely deep depths. It uses its bioluminescent organs and fascinating oxygen metabolism to thrive in parts of the ocean in the lowest concentrations of oxygen. It is unique for its strange appearance and strange bowl-like shape.

And my last animal is the Sea krait. A sea krait is a type of sea snake. Its scientific name is Genus *Bungarus*. It is semiaquatic; they spend most of their time in the water but surface to lay their eggs and occasionally to hunt they have wide ventral scales that allow them to move on land and paddle-shaped tails for swimming. They can be found in Australia.

OSA WAMSLEY, GRADE 7

Shoes

At the bottom of the donation box, mixed with the unwanted, I noticed many tiny shoes that years ago I flaunted. One pair, two pairs, three pairs, four, and after that, I still found more. Glitter and glitz, shimmer and shine, there were pink and purple shoes divine. These pairs were once at the bottom of the shoe rack. Every day, sitting perfectly like a mademoiselle, I shelved them each exactly parallel. These shoes I used to run and play, these shoes I used everyday. They were with me on every overnight stay, every last minute trip to Chick-Fil-a, and every time I went outside to play. They matched every outfit and went with every bag, and believe me, I loved to brag. But those were the days long fled. Now, I ditch my shoes at the door instead, and all my pinks and purples galore have transformed into sultry grey, black, and whites. Because the little girl who wore bright shoes was still afraid of heights. She still kept the lights on during nights, and out of her food could only manage tiny bites. I keep my shoes at the top of the rack now. I can finally reach it. Everyday, sitting perfectly like a mademoiselle I still shelve them exactly parallel.

LOIS WIREKOH, GRADE 8

Voices Without Words

Often, people use their voice to share their thoughts and emotions, but I use keys, strings, and breath. Stumbling upon the keys of a piano, I was intrigued. At the young age of 10, my fingers hit the keys of a piano for the first time in my life, the ringing sounds leaving a sound in my brain, a sound that I wanted to chase again. Just like any other newbie to anything, I began playing terribly; some people even laughed at me, yet I didn't let that get in my way. Every single morning, I'd wake up and play the piano until my fingers hurt, and then I would repeat the process over and over again. I enjoyed it. Playing piano was not only producing sound and music for me, but it was also reflecting my emotions, listening to my inner self, and sharing my thoughts without saying a word. As I was playing piano, I would feel a sense of healing without knowing exactly what was broken. I would spend hours playing different songs and started learning new songs so quickly that my skills surpassed my own expectations. Over the years, I

I started to explore different instruments, and each answered a different part of my soul. While I pick up different new instruments, my passion for music has never gone away.

In my first year of middle school, at 12 years old, I joined the band class because I had developed a new desire: to play a brass instrument. I'm not quite sure what invoked this want in me, but deep inside I felt the burning desire to choose the baritone. On the first day of playing, I had no clue how to play, not even knowing how to articulate my notes properly, so I practiced again. After a good 3 months of being in school playing the baritone, my concert had arrived. I took my steps up onto the stage with a crowd of about 50 other people in the band, and I began playing. At first, I was afraid, yet that fear ceased to exist as I realized I was not alone in

playing, but I was one of the best players. Ever since then, my confidence in playing has grown, and I'm currently in my advanced band at middle school, still playing baritone. I have played in all county-level bands, all district-level bands, and I believe I will continue to grow and one day play at the State and probably national level, as I feel very passionate.

At this point in time, I currently play both piano and baritone, percussion, and brass. Although it felt satisfying to me at first, it soon brought me to a realization, I still haven't tried a string instrument. It may seem silly how I supposedly "need to learn all kinds of instruments", but it's something I strive for, and I didn't want to suppress my emotion and my passion so easily. My longing for an instrument was what finally led me to buy a guitar; it was the Yamaha Pacifica, an electric guitar. When I finally got home, I tried playing, but my strings didn't resonate with the same sounds as the other countless people I've heard before, so I began searching. There, I came across "Guitar Lessons with Stuart", which completely flipped a switch in my brain; the understanding of the instrument as a whole came to me at once. I now play all 3: the piano, baritone, and, most recently, the guitar.

As I learnt different instruments, I feel each instrument carries its own spirit and tells a story about me and what I want to express. I feel enriched emotionally and spiritually and want to share this joy and profound moment with others as I play different songs with different instruments. Though trying a different instrument was not about performance, it was about the discovery of myself and my passion. Each instrument allows me to express a different side of my emotions, and it allows my heart to evolve.

AMIR YAWARI, GRADE 8

St. Charles Elementary School

Mom

My mom's name is Crystal Oaks. She was born in Harlan, Kentucky, in 1975. She had two sisters and one brother.

Her house looked older and it was a tan colored house she had lived in. Her house did have electricity when she was a young child. My mom had a chicken when she was growing up. Her chicken was named Jason. She loved her pet chicken. She did not really get an allowance, but when she got money she usually went to the candy shop to buy candy.

Her favorite games and activities were playing basketball, jumping rope, and hula hoop. Her chore assigned to her was cleaning dishes. She hated cleaning dishes.

The holidays that she celebrated were Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving, but she does not celebrate Halloween. Her family had a couple of traditions; they did mushroom hunting, and family outings.

The technology she used was game systems. Her favorite subject in school was math. She liked math very much. When she was a child she loved sports, the sports she played were basketball and softball. She still likes sports today—enjoying watching all of her grandkids. Her favorite television show was The Smurfs. Crystal's first job was babysitting. She got her first job probably around 10 or 12 years old. She says the biggest difference between then and now for her is that she is a lot older, and not as healthy as she was.

She gave me the best advice: She told me to always be proud of who I am and always do my best in everything I do.

MICHAELA ATOKA, GRADE 4

Best Mom Ever

My mom's name is Gina. She is 35 years old. She was born in 1990. My mom had one sister. She celebrated Christmas. She used to like Halloween and now she likes Christmas. When she was growing up she liked to watch Supernatural and her favorite sport was Softball. She moved houses. She did have electricity when she was growing up.

My mom married my Dad, (Greg) in 2011. On September 27, 2012, my brother Xander was born. Four years later I was born on January 4, 2016. My mom used to have a job at Burger King, but now she works at Walmart. She goes to work at night at 9 pm and leaves at 7am. She does not work on Tuesday or Wednesday. Today, my mom lives on Big Bear Road.

One of my mom's favorite things to do now is go shopping at Walmart. She loves doing crafts and playing Donkey Kong. My mom says the biggest difference from when she was growing up and now is the cost of living.

She also gave me some great advice. She told me not to grow up too fast, always try your hardest, and continue to be the loving person that you are. She is the BEST MOM EVER!

ZACK BOWENS, GRADE 4

The Best Nana

My nana's name is Tina Gail Disney. She is my mother's Mom. She was born in Winchester, Kentucky, in 1978. She was the oldest of five children. Her siblings' names are Tammy, Jay, Steven, and Danny.

When Nana was growing up she had a TV. She had no allowance and she had no pets. Her favorite game was checkers and her favorite outside activity was bike riding. Her chore was washing dishes. The holidays

they celebrated were Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter. Christmas was her favorite. The best thing she liked about Christmas is that it is about God and being with her family.

She had no technology. Her house was a brick house, it may be the same today as it was when she was growing up. She had electricity when was young. Her favorite subject in school was reading. She played no sports. Her favorite television show was Fresh Prince of Bel-Air. Her first job was working in Tobacco when she was 13.

She is married to my pawpaw. His name is Kenny Disney. They have three kids, the oldest of which is Rebeca(my mom!), Dustin, and Aaron Disney. She and I go to the park with my nana, pawpaw and my cousins Blake, Scott, and Zoey. She is good and healthy.

She has four animals. One cat, one bear(his name is Tom) pops in and out of the yard and likes to chase Jerry, and three dogs. Sadly, the cat passed away. One of the dogs ran away. His name was Red. Now she has a dog named Rusty, a dog named Cletus, and a cat named Jerry (he runs under the car so Tom can't get him).

My nana says the biggest difference between now and when she was growing up is wages. My nana gave me some good advice. She said to always work hard, believe in yourself, and most importantly put God First!

ALISON COOMER, GRADE 4

All About My Dad

My dad's name is Josh. He was born in Big Stone Gap, Virginia in 1984.

When my dad was growing up he had two dogs. Their names were Rocky and Jake. He played baseball, football, soccer, and wrestling. His favorite games were football and baseball. His chores were cleaning his room and helping with the yard. My Dad didn't get an allowance.

He only celebrated Christmas and Halloween. He didn't have any family traditions. His mom was cranky all the time. He watched TV when he was a kid. His favorite show was Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. During his childhood, the TV he had was different than now because their TV's were small and had antennas and now we have TV's with apps.

His childhood home was a trailer that is gone now. Sometimes my dad had electricity and sometimes he did not because of the bills. He loved History so much when he was a child. His first job was as a construction worker in 1998.

My Dad's advice to me is to enjoy life and don't work too hard.

KYNDAL DURHAM, GRADE 4

My Mom

My mom's name is Alaina. She was born in Big Stone Gap, Virginia in 1990.

My mom had two siblings, a brother and a sister. Since my mom was little she had to stay with my mamaw. My mamaw's house had a basement, three bedrooms, one bathroom and a large kitchen. It still looks the same as when my mom was growing up.

My mom did have electricity when she was growing up. She had a dog named Tiny. She didn't have an allowance. Some of her favorite things to do were riding a four wheeler, playing in the woods, or playing in the creek. The chores were dishes, cleaning the house, and bringing in wood or coal.

The holidays her family liked to celebrate were birthdays, Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and The Fourth of July. Her favorite tradition was having Christmas dinner.

The technology my mom used were tvs, a gameboy, and nintendos.

Her favorite subjects in school were Horticulture, Technology, and Home Economics. She did not play any sports. Her favorite television shows were Rug Rats and Golden Girls. Her first job was working in the Cafeteria at Lee High School when she was in the 11th Grade.

My mom says the biggest difference between now and when she was growing up is technology. My moms advice to me is to do my best and keep God close!

AMILENE GREEN, GRADE 4

The Best Dad

My dad's name is Zack Grizzle. He was born in Pennington Gap in 1995. His house was white with a big yard. It still stands today. His house did have electricity. When my dad was growing up he had a fluffy, white kitten named Snowball.

My dad did get an allowance, he received \$10.00 every 2 weeks and he spent it on sour candy. When my dad was growing up he enjoyed playing football and riding four wheelers. My dad's chores were to mow and take out the trash.

My dad enjoyed celebrating Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, and Halloween. His favorite tradition was watching the Super Bowl with his dad.

When my dad was growing up he had a TV, a Playstation 1, and a Playstation 2. In his free time he enjoyed watching Disney Channel.

My dad's favorite subjects were Math and Science. His favorite sport was football. My dad got his first job as a bagger at Food City, when he was 16. Today, I am proud to say that my dad is a Police Officer.

My dad says that the biggest difference between today and when he is growing up is technology. My dad's best advice was to try my best at everything I do.

KYLER GRIZZLE, GRADE 4

CB's Life

My papaw's name is CB Holmes. He is my dad's dad. CB was born in Keokee Virginia in April, 1951. He had 2 children, Mike(my dad) and Dave my uncle.

My papaw started out working at a rock quarry. At the quarry, his job was to load the trucks. Then he went to work at Lone Mountain. He used a dozer to push coal on to a conveyer that sent the coal to a train or a truck.

I love spending time with my papaw. He taught me how to run an excavator and we use it together. He has one cow and one calf. I enjoy helping him feed the animals sometimes.

He owns 9 acres in the same holler of Keokee he grew up in. He just moved up the hill a little from where he was raised. He bought a new-to-him truck; a 2022 model white Silverado. He named it "The White Stallion".

My papaw says the difference between now and then is that they had different kinds of vehicles.

MATTHEW HOLMES, GRADE 4

All About My Mom

My Mom's name was Brittany Jones. My mom was born in Lee County, Virginia, in 1989. Her parents are Johnny and Carolyn Jones. She has one sister, her name is Heather.

When she was little she had two pets. A dog named Sugar Babe, and a bird named Jonny. My mom got 5 dollars each Sunday for her allowance. She liked to spend it at Walmart.

Her favorite thing to do was play her Nintendo Game Cube. Her chores were cleaning her room, and the dishes. She celebrated all holidays, and she always celebrated Christmas together. Mom's house had electricity, and she used a desktop computer. Her house still looks the same.

Her favorite subjects in school were business and marketing. She did not play sports because like staying at home. She loved watching Saturday morning cartoons. Her first job was at Pizza Plus.

My mom says the biggest difference between then and now is that everything has changed and there are smartphones now. Mom's advice is to be kind, even when others are not.

BAYLEE JONES, GRADE 4

Worlds Best Grandpa

My grandpa's name is David Johnson. Papaw was born October 9, 1961, he was born in Michigan. When he was my age he moved to the clondikes of Virginia. His mother's name was Jimmie May, his father's name was Ottis Johnson (his nickname was Blue Duck). They are my great-grandparents.

Papaw had 3 brothers and 4 sisters. His brothers' names are Dennis, John, and Scott. His sisters' names are Pam and Debbie. Debbie called Papaw mater because every time she looked at Papaw he was eating a tomato.

My Papaw met my Mamaw, her name is Rachel when he was growing up in the Clondikes. They have a happy life together.

My grandpa grew up with pets. He had pigs, but he slaughtered them. He fed his pigs tiny pieces of coal. When Papaw was growing up he liked to play outside and fish. His family traditions were Father's day, Mother's day, going to church, Thanksgiving meals together, Easter, and The Fourth of July.

He did not get an allowance. He got food working on the farm. He dropped out of ninth grade to work on the farm. His favorite tv show was Bonanza. He did have a TV. Papaw did have electricity growing up. My Papaw's first job was lawnmowing, which he continues to do today.

The best advice my Papaw gave me is If you shake the trees, you have to deal with the bees, and rake the leaves.

NOAH JOHNSON, GRADE 4

My Wonderful Mommy

My mommy's name is Melissa Middleton . She was born in Manteca, California in 1982. She lived with her mom and 5 sisters. Her grandpa, Cliff Parr, was the Mayor of the town once, and owned his own pharmacy called Cliff's Drug Store.

My mommy had 2 cats growing up. Their names were Smokey and Whitney. Smokey was a brown and grey tabby. Whitney was an all black cat. They were very, very, friendly.

My mommy did not get an allowance, her mother could not afford to. The things my mommy did was ride bikes with sisters and friends all over town. My mommy would babysit for money. My mommy also enjoyed drawing, reading and camping. Her daily chores were: laundry, dusting, making her bed, pulling weeds, and sweeping.

In her free time she watched: TGIF, Blossom, The Wonder Years, Rainbow Bright, Care Bears, Tail Spin, and Duck Tales. She had a TV with an antenna called "rabbit ears", a rotary phone, original Nintendo, record player, and a radio that she shared with her sisters.

My mommy moved around a lot as a child. There were about 6 different houses she lived in. She had electricity in all the houses she lived in. Some of my mom's best memories were: Sunday dinners at her grandparents house after church. She would gather there with her mom, sisters, cousins, aunts, and uncles. She would spend the holidays there as well. These were some of her favorite family traditions.

My mommy loved baseball as a little girl. Although she had severe asthma, a fatal allergy to bees, and was too sick to play on a team. She did enjoy hitting baseballs in her backyard and watching baseball on tv. Her favorite team was: The Cleveland Indians.

My mommy went to Shasta Elementary school. Her favorite subjects were: math, reading, and art. Her favorite teacher was Mr Comden. She would walk to school with her sisters or by herself. She was what you

call a “ latch key” kid back then. She would also walk to work. Her 1st job was babysitting. My mommy no longer lives in California.

A lot of things have changed over the years. Kids don't ride their bikes everywhere like they used to. Kids don't go outside a lot like they used to. Technology has come a long way. In some ways it has done more harm than good, my mommy says. She longs for the simpler days.

My mommy's advice is: In life you may face hard times but, some things do get better. Put GOD first in all things and put your trust in him. Hold your loved ones close and cherish them.

AMELIA MIDDLETON, GRADE 4

All About My Sweet Mamaw

My mamaw's name is Freda Seals. She is my great-grandmother. She is my Dad's mamaw. She is very nice.

When she was growing up she had an ice box. She had to do a lot of chores. Her chores were doing the dishes and cleaning up around the house. She did not have power. Her house is not standing any more.

She did not have any pets. She lived in Arizona. She did have water. Her mom and dad were not there most of the time. She had some siblings. So while her mom and dad were not there she had to watch her siblings. She was the oldest. She never talked back.

Sometimes she had to cook because her mom and dad had to go and work. That is why they were gone most of the time. They had to be good or they would get in trouble. That is why she did not talk back. Her house was a four bed room house, but they did not have a lot of stuff.

She had to go to sleep at like 9:30. She would never lie to her mom and dad. She had a very hard childhood. Her siblings were very mean so she was dealing with a lot. She was the oldest so she had to do it all. They did not have a lot of money so her dad had to go hunt and her mom would cook. My mom was busy and her mom and dad were there all the time but they never stopped. Since she was the oldest she had to help with everything.

Her favorite thing to do was to draw. She did not have any family traditions, but she had some friends, but she did not get to play much, because she had to work a lot. Her first job was baby sitting. She did not have an allowance. When it was her birthday they did not celebrate because they were too busy. She did not have a TV, they had to listen to the radio.

My mamaw's advice was to never steal and to always be kind and to make the right choices.

IZABELLA SEALS, GRADE 4

My Mom

My mom's name is Amber Smith. She was born May 6, 1988. Her parents are Gidget and Lester. She has four brothers and one sister.

My mom's house when she was growing up looked like a big two story white house with a green roof. It is still there. My mom had a dog named Kaitie. It was a pit bull. My mom did not get an allowance when she was growing up. My mom enjoyed cheerleading and riding horses.

When my mom was growing up she did chores.

My mom's family celebrated Christmas, St. Patrick's Day, Thanksgiving and Easter, her favorite holiday is Christmas. My mom's family had the tradition of family dinners at her great-grandmother's house.

When my mom was growing up she had a land-line phone and still remembers the number. My mom's favorite subject in school was science and history. She was a cheerleader. Mom's favorite tv shows were anything on MTV, TRL, and Disney Channel. Her first job was at a call center when she was 19.

My mom has seven children, Tanner (Me), Damien, Keaton, Torbin, Ashe, Hannah, and Dylan.
She gave me the best advice: Keep your head up and follow Jesus!!

TANNER SMITH, GRADE 4

The History of My Papaw

My papaw's name is Terry Lee Sutton he was born February 3, 1956, in the Pennington Gap Hospital.

He had a dog whose breed was a cocker spaniel. His name was Bullet. He did not have an allowance but, every once and a while he would get a quarter. When he did get a quarter he would spend it on a cake, pop, and chips.

He liked to play tag, hide and go seek, and play in the creek. His chores were carrying coal, wood, kindling, and he would also carry clothing water.

He did celebrate every holiday. Every holiday he would have large meals with his sisters and parents.

He mostly had a radio and sometimes a tv. His dad would bring in every two months he could only watch the channels his dad watched. He likes to watch Gunsmoke(so I guess his Dad liked Gunsmoke). The house my papaw lived in was about the same. He did move houses a lot when he was younger until they found the one they liked. He had lights, a fridge, and a radio.

His favorite subjects were math and history. He liked to play baseball and football. He was 14 when he got his first job. It was a kids program where he made 1 dollar an hour that was a lot of money back then.

After that he married a wonderful lady named Rita May Stamey. She is my mamaw. They have a kid, my dad(Pete) they took care of other kids too. Now they take care of me.

Every night at 8:00 pm he lets me watch tv and he gets an apple for me. Sometimes he falls asleep and sometimes I go to bed and I can still hear the tv but that's okay.

In the morning when I am trying to get ready he tells me good bye but I say I'm not ready yet. One time he went to try to fix the road but he fell. My mamaw thought he broke his arm but he was okay. We live on a hill so that is why he tried to fix the road but all I care is that he is OK. I am the first one he let sled down the hill.

My papaw says the biggest difference between when he was growing up and is that he has more material things and money.

The best advice my papaw ever gave me was to learn all you can learn. It helps in life, and knowledge is power!

ISABELLA STAMEY-SUTTON, GRADE 4

**St. Paul
Elementary School**

Dustin Perrigan, 6th Grade Language Arts Teacher
Melissa Galliher, Librarian

I am from sandpits,
from Crayola
and Kool-Aid.
I am from the red house.
I am from a front porch swing,
from trees,
and from dirt.
I'm from baking on weekends
And blue eyes, from Daisy and Mike.
I'm from movie nights
and game nights.
From "stop growing."
And "be quiet."
I'm from church on Sunday,
being kind.
I'm from Germans.
From tacos and spaghetti.
From the girl in the lake.
I am from Castlewood.

LAYLA AUSTIN, GRADE 6

I am from books,
from dad jokes,
and fairytales.
I am from the mountains.
I am from dolls,
from the garden,
and the smell of mac'n cheese.
I am from corn,
the carrots.
I'm from the opening presents on Christmas
and the red hair, from Jessica
and Daniel.
I'm from the church-going on Sundays
and going to the library on Saturdays.
From "you have the prettiest hair."
And "never talk to strangers."
I'm from the Lord
and thinking ghosts would haunt me.
I'm from veterans of the war.
From chicken pot pie and mac'n cheese.
From the joke about a kid.
I'm from Abingdon.

CHARLOTTE BARRETT, GRADE 6

I am from trees,
from Birch
and Cedar.
I am from the peacefulness.
I am from not staring at a device,
from toys,
and from smelling fresh cookies.
I am from the sunflowers,
the daisies.
I'm from opening gifts on Christmas Eve
and brown hair, from Brittany and Matthew.
I am from the kindness
and vacation.
From "play outside."
And "be kind."
I'm from God,
the bible.
I'm from my parents getting married.
From turkey and ham.
From the Little Red Riding Hood.
I am from Virginia.

MADISON BELLAMY, GRADE 6

I am from the playground,
from ice cream
and swings.
I am from the mountains.
I am from crazy siblings,
from dressing up,
and from flowers.
I am from the trees,
the easter lilies.
I'm from different eye colors
and different hair colors, from Chris
and Mechell.
I'm from Monopoly
and Uno playing.
From "Guess we got to cut your leg off."
and "Rub some dirt on it."
I'm from the lord,
His church.
I'm from the Perrigan family.
From homemade chicken and dumplings to homemade chicken noodle soup.
From rubbing cake on faces.
I am from Castlewood.

ARABELLA BENTLEY, GRADE 6

I am from toys,
 from American Girl dolls
 and Barbies.
 I am from the home with the treehouse in the front yard.
 I am from playing,
 from sleepovers with friends and family,
 and the smell of my mom's cooking.
 I am from the sunflowers,
 the leaves from the trees.
 I'm from the family reunion
 and dirty blonde hair, from Mahala
 and Andrew.
 I'm from the spaghetti on Wednesdays
 and vacations.
 From "pick up your toys."
 and "clean your room".
 I'm from Jesus Christ,
 and kindness.
 I'm from the Blevins family.
 From spaghetti, soup beans, and corn bread.
 I am from Coeburn, Virginia.

ZOEY BLEVINS, GRADE 6

I am from soap,
 From Dawn
 and Cascade.
 I am from the Mountains.
 I am from being Hard-working, from cleaning,
 and from the smell of peanut butter cookies.
 I am from the forest, the Greenhouse.
 I'm from doing New Year's
 and being tall, from Bobbi and from Brad.
 I'm from the "arguing with my sister."
 and making cookies.
 I'm from the "eyes in the back of my head."
 and "The Boy Who Cried Wolf."
 I'm from The Bible,
 The Lord.
 I'm from being sick in the winter.
 From fruit and meat.
 From the green eggs and ham.
 I am from my house in Coeburn.

EPHRAIM BOYD, GRADE 6

I am from breakfast,
 from lunch
 and to dinner.

I am from the garden.
I am from mischief,
from the sweetness,
and the smell of apple cinnamon.
I'm from the vines to the flower fields.
I'm from Thanksgiving and turkey,
from my mom and my dad.
I'm from the fireworks and the sky.
From my imagination,
and what day it was.
I'm from the ships of history.
From homemade pizza and homemade cookies.
From the story of Bigfoot.
I'm from the pictures of childhood.

IZZY BUSH, GRADE 6

I am from television,
from Clorox
and Good Value.
I am from the blue house with three beds and one bath.
I am from floors that always creak,
From a huge yard, always playing,
And it always gives a nostalgic smell.
I am from the forest behind my house,
The bushes that cover the outside.
I'm from the Halloween Party,
And the whole family of men was coal miners, from Mom and Dad.
I am from the men who always have the same job
And men are always working in coal mines.
From "treat people how you wanna be treated."
and "what you give will always return."
I'm from God,
Kindness will always come back.
I have blue eyes.
From ranch and milk.
From the horrific story of a car crash.
I am from Trammel, VA.

HADLYN DOTSON, GRADE 6

I am from playgrounds,
pools,
and trampolines.
I am from the mountains.
I am from playing with siblings, not playing on phones or iPads, and from nice Kool-Aid and
snacks on hot summer days.
I am from lavender and roses.
I am from going to Edisto Beach every year.

Same eyes as dad. From the Hairs and Anna.
I am from game nights and hikes.
from respect your elders and to be honest.
I am from God and family.
I'm from my mom and dad being married.
From Pete the Cat.
I am from Georgia.

BRITTON HAIR, GRADE 6

I'm from the trees,
from the streaming of the water
and the flowing of the trees.
I'm from the home of a warm
and a comforting home.
I'm from hanging out with my sister
and playing with my dogs,
from going on family hikes,
and from smelling the freshly baked
goods.
I'm from the daisies in my backyard
in the Spring,
and the leaves that fall off in the fall.
I'm from going on vacations every Summer,
and having brownish blond hair and
greenish hazel eyes, from Mark and Lara.
I'm from having game nights every
Friday and watching sports every Saturday.
From "Don't stay up too late."
and "Stranger Danger".
I'm from the Lord.
I'm from the Appalachian Mountains
From salad and grilled chicken
From the Clinch River Summer Festival,
that my Grandmother started.
I am from St. Paul, VA

SOFIA HARRISON, GRADE 6

I am from the mountains,
from cake,
and brownies.
I am from Appalachia.
I am from playing with my brother,
from camping,
and from the smell of freshly baked cookies.
I am from the trees,
the roses.
I'm from opening presents on Christmas Eve

and the same eyes from Kayla and Jerry.
I'm from the game nights
and movie nights.
From "respect your elders."
and "always be safe."
I'm from God and Jesus.
I'm from my mom and dad getting married.
From steak and salad.
From the stories of Pete the Cat.
I am from Virginia.

GRAYSON HARVEY, GRADE 6

I am from bed,
from Ashleys,
and spring.
I am from a house with a big yard.
I am from a new house,
from happy,
and from a house with a fence.
I am from the tulip,
the rose.
I'm from a house that does fireworks every year,
and brown hair, from mom and stepdad.
I'm from the noise and loudness.
From "Ava, stop."
and "do chores."
I'm from god,
from Jesus.
I'm from a blended family
From pizza and raman.
From the arguing almost every vacation.
I am from Virginia.

AVA HOLBROOK, GRADE 6

I am from working,
from punch,
and biscuits and gravy.
I am from a house with a fence.
I am from cats,
from working hard,
and from the smell of coconut cake.
I am from the cedar tree,
the grass.
I'm from biscuits and gravy.
And brown eyes, from mom
and dad.
I'm from the Thanksgiving

and Christmases.
From “do your homework.”
I’m from God,
and kindness.
I’m from a long line of farmers.
From biscuits and gravy.
From the haunted house.
I am from Castlewood.

BRANTLEY HUGHES, GRADE 6

I am from water,
from soda
and Dr. Pepper.
I am from the river.
I am from the ocean,
from the woods,
and from fire.
I am from the trees,
the sunflowers.
I’m from building
and difference, from Rob
and Jessie.
I’m from shouts
and yells.
From hellos
and goodbyes.
I’m from science.
I’m from building.
From fudge and cookies.
From history.
I am from America.

MICHAEL IVEY, GRADE 6

I am from St. Paul,
from mac and cheese,
and bananas.
I am from the basketball hoop in the front yard.
I am from going to church
from playing vr
and from smelling moms cakes.
I am from the flower and the bush in the front yard.
I’m from Thanksgiving dinners and family costumes
from Marcus and Amelia
I’m from the family Halloween costumes and playing cards
From “do your chores.”
and “wash your clothes.”
I’m from Jesus Christ

and Thanksgiving.
I'm from playing games.
From bananas and apples.
From walking to school barefoot,
I am from Dollywood.

JEREMIAH JOHNSON, GRADE 6

I am from a place where the trees hold memories.
I am from the house on a hill.
I am from a loving family,
from tall pines,
and from sizzling bacon in the kitchen.
I am from the meadows,
the pumpkin patches.
I'm from Christmas vacation every year
and brown-haired beauties from mom and dad.
I'm from the toasting marshmallows on a fire
and campers.
From "treat others the way you want to be treated."
and "go clean your room."
I'm from God's Holy Word
and David's slingshot.
I'm from the pioneers and the Native Americans.
From potatoes and chicken.
From the time I was eating popcorn with a bear while camping.
I am from a family on a hill.

NOLAN JOHNSON, GRADE 6

I am from deer jerky,
from hunting,
and Dr. Pepper.
I am from the old white house.
I am from fishing,
From getting put in the corner,
and from getting in trouble sometimes.
I am from the green grass,
the rose bushes.
I'm from family bonfires,
and brown hair, from my mom and my dad.
I'm from the blonde hair
and blue eyes.
From "get down from there."
And "get up, it's time for school."
I'm from jacked-up trucks,
and loud cars.
I'm from working hard.
From sweet tea and chicken casserole.

From the fishing trips.
I am from that old white house.

COLT JOHNSON, GRADE 6

I am from pencil,
from Pen+Gear
and No.2/HB.
I am from the small.
I am from a separated,
from different,
and from comfort.
I am from the sunflower,
the grass.
I'm from the summer in New York
and freckles, from Mom
and Oma.
I'm from the warm ocean.
From "buggie!"
And "I love you."
I'm from God,
And heaven.
I'm from the Germans.
From apple pie and turkey.
From the snake skin that scared my mom.
I am from North Carolina, New York, and Virginia.

ADA JOHNSTON, GRADE 6

I am from a small town,
from sports
and ice cream.
I am from the little white house in a small village.
I am from sleepovers with Harper,
from pageants with Alivia,
and from fresh banana bread.
I am from the roses and the trees.
I'm from opening gifts on Christmas Eve
and blonde hair, from Trint and Kristina.
I'm from movie nights and walks with dad.
From "clean your room."
and "go to bed."
I'm from God and peace.
I'm from my mom and dad getting together.
From mac and cheese and corn bread.
I am from my backyard.

TIERRA JONES, GRADE 6

I am from root beer floats.
From birthday cake ice cream.

And hot summer days
 I am from the old rusted porch swing.
 I am from the backyard creek.
 From playing with the chickens.
 And from the old back roads.
 I am from the plants my mamaw grows on the windowsill.
 The plant wrapped around the sink.
 I am from going to the beach every summer.
 And everyone has blue eyes, from my mom, who always did the most for us.
 And taking us to Dollywood.
 I'm from the way everyone had brown hair.
 And being right-handed.
 From how every day might be your last.
 And to never take anything for granted.
 I'm from believing in god.
 And how Jesus died on the cross for us.
 I'm from all the back roads.
 From steak and soup.
 From the time we went camping, a bobcat ate all of our snacks.
 I'm from Virginia.

BURKLEIGH KISER, GRADE 6

I am from cow fields,
 from Mack,
 and Troy
 I am from the tree house in the woods.
 I am from making cookies at my grandma,
 and the smell of my nana's house.
 I am from playing in the woods,
 The pumpkins growing.
 I'm from going to my uncle's house for Christmas.
 And game master.
 I'm from God,
 and the Bible.
 I'm from the Irish,
 and from cookies,
 and pumpkin roll.
 From the coat of many colors.
 I am from Castlewood.

KINLEY KITE, GRADE 6

I am from the morning coffee,
 from Justin boots
 and Cat and Jack Jeans.
 I am from the green house over the hill.
 I am from hearing the creaks in the old floor,
 from being famous (I was on CNN)

and the old smell from the house.
I am from the yellow sunflowers,
the roses on the thorn bus.
I'm from the family get-togethers
and Nerf Gun wars on Christmas, from Shy Shy making food
and dad playing football with me.
I'm from the prayer before we eat
and Sunday Night Football.
From "keep your chin up."
And "you got this!"
I'm from the morning Sunday services
and learning about Jesus.
I'm from being related to Pocahontas.
From mom's spaghetti and pizza.
From the story of what my parents did back in the day.
I am from Castlewood, Virginia.

BRYSON KLIEMANN, GRADE 6

I am from baseballs,
from flowers,
and springtime.
I am from the yard filled with toys.
I am from watching WWE with my dad,
from movies,
and from Dollar Tree trips.
I am from the firemen,
the Chick-Fil-A
I'm from Mom's Hamburger Helper
and Fridays with Dad,
From Mom, Dad,
and DJ.
I'm from traveling
and family bonding.
From "I love you."
and "keep it down."
From being kind,
a good friend.
I'm from beach vacations.
From strawberry ice cream and spaghetti.
From the first people.
I am from the house on Gray Hill.

A.J. LITTLEWHIRLWIND, GRADE 6

I am from the Sherbert
and ice cream.

I am from the hills.
I am from the arguing,
I am from growing out of stuff.
I am from the trees,
I am from the yearly snow cream,
the trees.
I am from homemade garlic bread
and brown eyes, from Casey
and Nick.
I am from the yearly snow cream
and monthly spaghetti.
From "Stop arguing."
and "Don't do that, it is bad for you."
I am from Jesus
and god.
I am a war veteran.
From snow cream and spaghetti.
From treating people kindly
I am from the park.

DESTERY LOVELL, GRADE 6

I am from trampolines,
from soap
and bed.
I am from the land of apple cider.
I am from a small house,
From eating,
and a home of windows.
I am from the lilies.
From the trees
I am from Christmas.
And we all have big teeth,
From the Millers, from Albert Miller
I am from eating out every week.
From shopping.
From The Boy Who Cried Wolf
And The Skinwalker Man
I am from God and angels singing.
I am from Adam and Eve.
From steak and shrimp.
From the King of Scotland.
I am from the land.

ASHER MILLER, GRADE 6

I am from electronics,
from cucumbers,

and tomatoes.
I am from the house in the subdivision.
I am from gardens,
from dirt,
and from seeing trees.
I am from the willow tree in my front yard,
The flowers in my flower bed.
I'm from going to my aunt's house for Thanksgiving
And blue to hazel eyes, from Rex
and Andrea.
I'm from playing in the snow
and sledding.
From "be quiet."
and "calm down".
I'm from the great Lord,
kindness and respect.
I'm from a family of carponders.
From hamburgers and watermelon.
From the time my grandparents built a house.
I am from the house in the subdivision.

ISABELLA MUSICK, GRADE 6

I am from skateboards,
from bubbles
and chalk.
I am from the house with the red roof.
I am from my cat,
from the fireplace,
and from the taste of cheesecake.
I am from the forest,
the daisies.
I'm from playing games
and brown hair, from my mom
and dad.
I'm from the games of Uno
and playing in the snow.
From "clean your room."
And "do the dishes."
I'm from God,
from peace.
I'm from grilled cheese and ramen.
I am from Gravel Lick.

GRACIE NORRIS, GRADE 6

I am from French toast,
from vinegar cleaner,

and rust remover.
I am from watching football,
from video games and baseball,
and my sister's pink room.
I'm from the grass
and pumpkins.
I'm from watching fireworks
and green eyes, from Greg
and Becky.
I'm from traveling
and driving.
From "dinner's ready."
and "stop that."
I'm from Christ and family.
I'm from the Vikings.
From pizza and burgers.
From the story of Green Eggs and Ham.
I'm from Saint Paul.

ELI PHELPS, GRADE 6

I am from the swingset outside,
from Kool-Aid and hot dogs.
I am from a house with a hill on either side.
I am from the swings flying high
and the wind blowing by
and from the smell of fresh potato soup.
I am from the blackberry bush and the cedar tree in the yard.
I'm from dry land fishing in the fall, and blue eyes from my sister and my brother.
I'm from The Bible
and Jesus.
From "adhd is a super power."
and "autism is too."
I'm from Jesus and Santa.
I'm from farming.
From warm hot chocolate and fresh steak.
From the mockingbird.
I am from Bad Ridge, where life wasn't bad.

LEVI PHILLIPS, GRADE 6

I am from hunting,
from tree to tree,
and barking dogs.
I am from the family farm.
I am from the playset,
from going down the slide,
and from the swing.
I am from the oak tree,

the rose bush.
I'm from hosting Thanksgiving breakfast
and brown eyes, from Dana
and Hunter.
I'm from playing cards
and riding e-bikes.
From being told to take out my cat litter
and get up out of bed for school.
I'm from the lord,
and sunshine.
I'm from World War 2.
From crab legs and deer jerky.
From the talking horse.
I am from Virginia.

ELLIS POWERS, GRADE 6

I am from my pc,
from Reese,
and ghost pepper.
I am from the house with trees.
I am from the nice house,
from the trees,
and from the rose bushes.
I am from the roses,
the tomatoes.
I'm from Pigeon Forge,
And being funny,
From Kay and Aaron.
I'm from playing video games,
And laughing with my family.
From "never to too much cheese."
And "taco day every day."
I'm from god,
and being nice.
I'm from gardening.
From pizza,
And tacos.
From the boy who cried wolf.
I am from Tennessee.

JAXON POWERS, GRADE 6

I am from chickens,
ice cream,
and stickers.
I am from the white house.
I am from grass,
sunshine,

and my dog.
I am from the big maple tree,
and the dandelions.
I'm from early Christmases and brown hair.
From Jessica Ryan and Kyle Powers.
I'm from board games,
And I'm usually 2nd place.
From "You look like your mom."
and "You're so funny."
I'm from God and Jesus.
I'm from "Your great-grandfather was born in 1931."
From lasagna and peanut butter pie.
From the "Your grandad is from Ohio."
I am from Wise, VA.

LAYLA POWERS, GRADE 6

I am from a pencil,
from Capri-Sun,
and Snickers.
I am from the swings.
I am from the sound of glass,
from watching movies,
and from the smell of vanilla.
I am from the violet flowers,
the maple trees.
I'm from watching movies and small noses,
from Leo and Adam.
I'm from the trip to the beach and eating with my family.
From being told to "quiet down."
and calling people Shakira.
I'm from the house of the lord, and a Christian.
I'm from War World 1.
From rice and eggs.
From The Boy Who Cried Wolf.
I am from Bristol.

AVERIE RAMSEY, GRADE 6

I am from riding SXS,
from riding horses,
and eating push pops.
I am from the house with the red roof.
I am from laughing in the living room,
from playing outside,
And from smelling vanilla in the living room.
I am from the house with the tree that has flowers on it,
the dandelions in the yard.
I'm from going on a cruise every summer

And having small noses,
from the Riddle and Turner family
And mom and dad.
I'm from the going to church every Sunday
and eating lunch with my nana every Sunday.
From not talking back
and always being nice.
I'm from believing in God,
And Jesus.
I'm from living long.
From steak and potatoes.
From the house that had bats, and I thought it was haunted.
I am from swimming in the pool.

CORA RIDDLE, GRADE 6

I am from controllers,
from Dr. Pepper
and Almond Joys
I am from the animal haven.
I am from the house on the hill,
from the complicated time,
and from the smell of dogs.
I am from the homegrown peppers,
the crunchy red grapes.
I'm from opening presents on the eve
and skinny men, from Olivia and Brian
I'm from the dog owners
and farmers.
From "get on the point."
and "take cover."
I'm from equality,
progression.
I'm from grandfathers who barely avoided war.
From chicken and Sloppy Joes.
From the dead men.
I am from the houses on the hills.

REMY RUDD, GRADE 6

I am from trees,
from sunshine
and green grass.
I am from a house with a big playground.
I am from movies at night,
from nights at my grandparents' house,
and from the amazing smell of a candle at night.
I am from the dandelions in the summer,
and the snow in the winter.

I'm from Christmas dinner
and brown hair,
from Britney and Jonathon.
I'm from the countdown on New Year's Eve
and church on Sunday.
From "you'll be fine."
And "It'll be ok."
I'm from God,
and Christians.
I'm from the Indians who once lived here.
From biscuits'n'gravy in the morning
and pizza in the afternoon.
From the country, where I will always be.
I am from Castlewood, Virginia.

ELISE SALTER, GRADE 6

I am from toys,
from Shopkins,
and Barbies.
I am from the orange house.
I am from the black leather couch,
from bickering siblings,
and from the scent of detergent.
I am from the yellow peonies
the dogwood tree.
I'm from Topsail,
and personality from my mom
and my grandma.
I'm from the beaches
and sunny shorelines.
From hushing
and being told to sleep.
I'm from Jesus Christ.
My shepherd.
I'm from America.
From mashed potatoes and pasta.
From the Little Red Riding Hood.
I am from the orange house on the hill.

CAROLINE SAWYERS, GRADE 6

I am from hot dogs,
from bananas
and fudge.
I am from the state of Pennsylvania.
I am from the apartments,
from Dollywood,
and from the open patio view.

I am from the tree,
the big tree.
I'm from biscuits and gravy on Sunday,
and tall height,
from Jeff
and Ellie.
I'm from anger
and hunger.
I'm from luck,
and lazy.
I'm from the rich and the poor.
From popcorn and bread.
From The Boy Who Cried Wolf.
I am from Pennsylvania.

SAM SIMON, GRADE 6

I am from the vines, the air,
Country Crock,
and Cheerios.
I am from the house I grew up in, the house with two floors.
I am from a house with four siblings,
from two teenagers and two preteens,
and from the smell of roast beef.
I am from the rose bushes
and from pine trees.
I'm from one gift on Christmas Eve,
and green eyes, from Jesse, and Thomas.
I'm from the loud house,
and arguments.
From never lie,
and do the laundry.
I'm from kindness and friendship.
From roast and pizza.
From "we had to walk to school."
I am from Clinch River.

NATALIE THOMAS, GRADE 6

I am from the playground slides,
from Barbies
and stuffed animals.
I am from the house with a trampoline.
I am from playing with my brothers,
from watching cartoons,
and from the smell of fresh laundry coming out of the dryer.
I am from the grass,
the trees.
I'm from going to the beach every summer

and blonde hair, from my mom and my dad.
I'm from trips to Pigeon Forge
and Gatlinburg.
From "clean your room."
And "go to bed."
I'm from Jesus,
the cross.
I'm from the Turners.
From mac and cheese and spaghetti.
From the first time I walked.
I am from Castlewood.

HARPER TURNER, GRADE 6

I am from my bed,
from pop
and juice.
I am from the windows.
I am from toys,
from short,
and from hot dogs
I am from the snakes,
the tulips.
I'm from eating pie
And brown eyes,
From the Witts and Dutys.
I'm from fixing stuff
and cars.
From the white-dressed woman
and ghosts.
I'm from god,
ghosts.
I'm from the old family.
From bananas and pizza.
From the Creepy man.
I'm from Gray Hill.

TUKER WITT, GRADE 6

I am from the trampoline,
the sand,
and sun.
I am from the loud yet quiet.
I am from the dogs,
from homeschool to public,
and from the soft touch of clean towels.
I am from the tulip poplars,
and maples.
I'm from Christmas cookies

and the Muscogee tribe, from Nicole, Taylor,
Reagan and Mary.
I'm from the Church
and telling jokes.
From "Hey girl!"
and "Are you ok?"
I'm from Jesus Christ,
and joy.
I'm from funny stories.
From chicken and pork chops.
From my brother getting lost at Disneyland.
I am from Newport News.

LUCY WOOD, GRADE 6

Union Middle School

Jennifer Whiteaker, Grade 6 Teacher
Kristen Twigg Cote, Grade 6 Teacher
Jill Boggs, Grade 6 Teacher
Jade McCoy, Grade 6 Teacher
Allison Austin, Grade 6 Teacher

My Dogs

I have a lot of dogs. Here are all the names: Tigger, Brick, Maggie, Tank, Diamond, Jackson, Brownie, Bou Bear, Bruno, Bella.

Tigger is a really energetic hound mix. Even though he is the second biggest dog in the house, he acts like a puppy. He was a rescue, so I don't know the exact age. Brick and Tigger were found together. Brick is kind of a caramel-like beige color. He is like a puppy, too, but he can be good on chains while Tigger is the escape artist.

Jackson was best friends with another pup named Missy that died from cancer. He likes to play with tennis balls, and he does a victory lap in the grass when he gets one. He also is a sweetheart. Even though he is tiny, he has the legs of a puppy running energetically. Tank is a really energetic dog, but he does not like the thought of being alone without his owner. He will literally howl if he is left alone in his crate. Beds are not allowed in his crate because he will tear them up.

Bruno is a border collie rescue, and he loves playing around. Bella is a beagle mix. She can sometimes try to act like a dog mom and correct people. She is also loving, and she gets excited when she sees anyone. She always loves being petted and makes a little sound like a happy growl, but she makes a lot of oils, and it makes me itchy and sneezy. Brownie is the father of the puppies that we adopted. You have to make sure to walk up slowly and have your hand out to pet him. He does not like people being too fast.

Maggie is a really good jumper, and nothing can stop her. One time, we put something on the stairs to keep downstairs dogs from getting upstairs, but she jumped over it. She is really good at squeezing through and jumping over things. Also, be careful because if you come near her, you may get jumped on because she is excited. She really likes getting into things, and she will chew on anything. She likes to steal things. Bou Bear was rescued from the side of the road. They thought he was hit, but when my uncle went to check on him, Bou Bear got in the car. He has really beautiful brown eyes. I think he is a mountain dog species. Also, he is really energetic, but right now, he has to be carried and babied, so he can get healthy.

My favorite dog is Diamond. She is my dog, and she has a lot of behaviors. She loves to play and be petted, especially on her belly and back. She doesn't like to be petted on her legs, snout, tail, or paws, or she will try to nip.

My mom and I do this boop-be-duh thing where we boop the dog in the nose, and the dog tries to catch you. If you get them, you say "Boop-be-duh", and that's an activity I do with my dog when playing. It's a fun thing for the dog and for me. I really love all my dogs. They are all really sweethearts. They are all special and cool.

JAYSON ANDERSON, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from Bath & Body Works.
From Nike and Under Armour,
I am from the cozy movie nights,
the sound of my name being called when food is done,
the smell of apple cinnamon,

the feeling of calm, warm, cozy, and love.
I am from the rope swing in my backyard,
Its creaking sound when it sways.
I'm from putting out Santa's cookies and brown hair.
From Nikki and Christopher.
I'm from givers and huggers.
From "Treat others the way you want to be treated" and
"Actions speak louder than words."
I'm from the Pentecostal church
and never missing a service.
I'm from Abingdon, VA
A descendant of Germany and Scotland,
dirt cake and manicotti
From the story about when Caleb wrecked his scooter and
the time when Elijah cut his foot on glass.
In picture frames kept on nightstands and walls
are happy, loving, and funny memories.

LYDIA ANDERSON, GRADE 6

The Colors of My Life

Red is my hate for school.
My distaste for early mornings.
Red is my hate for math homework.
Sitting there trying to get the right answer
for thirty minutes straight.
Feeling frustrated.
Red like the summer heat creeping in May to be met in June.
When my cousins and I were playing football
with a stuffed penguin
because we couldn't find our football.
Hot, sunny, fun days.

Yellow is like the beautiful spring flowers swaying in the breeze.
The bright sunshine.
The bright yellow fall leaves.
The color of joy, yellow, is for me.
Like one time, we went to the circus
with my nana
There were elephants, dancers, and motorcycle riders.
My favorite part was riding the elephant.
Yellow is my memory of the circus with my family.

Blue like the calming ocean waves.
Like the beautiful rain.
My name, Infinity, is blue.

It means forever.
Blue like the calm flowing river.
Blue like the bright blue sky
Like the time we went to Myrtle Beach
when I was ten
on the beach at night
looking for sea lice crawling in the sand.
We caught a bunch of fish.
Blue is my trip to the beach with my family.

INFINITY ARRINGTON, GRADE 6

Priscilla

I interviewed Priscilla, my great grandmother, to learn about her proudest moment, favorite memory, most significant event, and daily routine as a child. She is most proud of her family. Her favorite memory is when her family members were born. The most significant event that happened in her life was the end of World War II. On Saturday mornings as a child, Priscilla would wake up, sweep, mop, wash dishes, and start lunch.

MADELYN BARBER, GRADE 6

My Grandmother's Necklace

The heirloom I chose is my grandmother's necklace. It's a gold cross necklace and it has been in my family for around 34 years. A long time ago, my dad bought his mom a gold cross necklace for her birthday, and she wore it every day. It was passed down to my dad before she passed away, and now it's owned by me. This necklace is important to my family because it was my grandmother's favorite item, and now she is no longer with us. It is a way that we can remember her forever.

My grandmother never took it off. This heirloom reminds my family of my grandmother because she was always wearing it. To me this heirloom is special because my dad trusts me with something very important to him. It helps me feel connected to my grandmother I never met. I want to keep this object in my family to keep the memory of my grandmother alive.

WILLA BEVINS, GRADE 6

All About Zayden

Zayden
Funny, artistic, energetic
Relative of Zayne and Zaymian
Lover of Fortnite, sports, hunting
Who feels sad, happy, mad
Who needs oxygen, friends, home
Who gives love, hugs, laughs
Who fears bees, dreams, not growing
Who wants to see Japan, New York, London
Resident of Big Stone Gap, Virginia
Black

ZAYDEN BLACK, GRADE 6

The Diamond Ring

A long time ago, my great-great-great-grandmother, Evie Dall, passed down her diamond wedding ring to my mamaw, Jan Blanken. When my mamaw was diagnosed with ALS, she passed it down to me. Now that my mamaw has passed away, it is very special to me. This heirloom reminds my family of my mamaw, Jan. Every time I look at it, it reminds me of her.

LILLY BLANKEN, GRADE 6

The Color of My Life

The big brown cabin sitting in the woods.
High up in the sky, way down in the nooks.
Front side in Stickleystown, back side in Jasper.
The big brown cabin looking lonelier than it is.
The big brown cabin sitting in the woods
built in 2021, finished in 2025.
From a camping spot to a cabin.
Loving it every day.
The big brown cabin, loved in every way.

ADELYN BLEDSOE, GRADE 6

All About Bethany

Bethany
Shy, sweet, funny
Relative of mom and dad, sisters Callie and Abbie
Lover of dance, soccer, and peach rings
Who feels sad, happy, and nervous
Who needs Jesus, family, and food
Who gives gifts, advice, and conversation
Who fears metal, needles, and dentists of any kind
Who would like to see Disney, New York, and Hamilton
Resident of Powell Valley Road
Bloomer

BETHANY BLOOMER, GRADE 6

A Girl Named Gracie

My mom and dad went to my grandfather's house, and I made an unexpected appearance early. My parents were shocked, but my grandfather chuckled and said, "Hey, pure innocent birth. Don't be shocked! That's a normal thing in life."

My parents got the name Gracie from Grace. It means blessing, kindness, and helpfulness. I think it fits me because I always try to be kind to everyone. My aunts and uncle thought I should be named Cori because of my wide ocean blue eyes that looked pure and innocent, but my parents were worried that I would get bullied in the future, so they stayed with Gracie as my blue eyes turned dark green, light green, and a few other colors of green with the same ocean blue color around them when I was around three months old.

My parents thought my life color was going to be orange like pumpkins and Halloween because I loved pumpkins, and I was very bold and loud, especially when I was two years old. At three years old, however, I flipped and became quiet and unreadable. I became like white roses or a piece of blank paper.

My favorite memory is when I was in second grade. My parents and I went to Gatlinburg, Tennessee. It was the first time I ever got to ride on a Ferris wheel. It was fun, but it was also terrifying at the same time because I am usually a person who likes to stay on the ground. I don't like heights. My parents encouraged me to be brave. This is a memory that reminds me that I can have courage and not be afraid of things.

GRACIE BOGGS, GRADE 6

Marjorie Joann Lawson

I interviewed Marjorie Joann Lawson to learn about her proudest moment, favorite memory, most significant event, and daily routine as a child. Marjorie Joann Lawson is my great grandma who I call Nan. She is 91 years old.

Nan's proudest moment is her three children: Gary, Walter, and Phane. She has six grandchildren and 17 great grandchildren. Her favorite memory is when she met her husband. He came to her house to see another girl but found Nan, and they were married for 67 years. The most significant event in Nan's life was World War II. Her brother fought and was injured in the Battle of the Bulge. Her husband fought and was injured in the Korean War. As a child, Nan walked one mile to a two-room school that held about 50 to 75 people. Her dad owned a Model T Ford, and there was no electricity in her house until she was 13. She carried coal to the fireplace and the stove and had to pack a lunch for school. She helped care for the garden, watched her mom cook as a child and is now the best cook I know. Her best advice is to put faith first, respect people, be kind, and lastly laugh. She was saved by Christ at 15.

ISAIAH BOLLING, GRADE 6

Camping with the Boone's

My family tradition is going RV camping in the summer and fall. Every summer, we pack up our black Chevy truck and camper with supplies and head to a campground in Charlottesville, Virginia. It takes about seven hours to drive there, and I usually sleep on the way. When we get there, we unpack, and the first thing we do is cook dinner since it is usually late. We usually stay there around a week. They have a few playgrounds and a jump pad that I play on with my brothers. There is a trail there that I like to hike, and sometimes, we play horseshoes and explore. Once, we went off trail, and it was an adventure to find our way back. At night, we make smores and will sometimes go to the Firefly restaurant to eat and play games. My favorite game to play is the foosball table, and I play with my older brother, Parker, but he usually wins.

Once, we went camping at Holden Beach, and we got up early to play in the sand, swim, and look for sea-shells. We left with a big bucket full of interesting shells! We even found a shark tooth!

My mom has enjoyed camping ever since she was a little girl and went camping with her friends. This family tradition is important to me because it's fun and I love the wilderness and nature. Just like my mom, I like to explore new places and go on adventures.

ISABELLA BOONE, GRADE 6

What's in a Name?

My name is 'Breelynn'. The meaning of my name is "noble and exalted". Noble means high rank in character, and it refers to someone with an energetic, kind, boastful personality. Exalted means a high rank or status by someone possessing joy, happiness and wealth.

My name was originally going to be ‘Tebree’ which sounds weird, I know. My mom named me from a mix of teddy bear “Te” and my grandmother’s name, Brianna. Whenever I was a toddler, I would call myself “Bree” or “Bree-Bree” if I was happy. That’s how I ended up with the name Breelynn.

I think my name suits me because I’m happy, joyful and I live a great life at home. I’m quite blessed to live in such a way that my happiness comes from love and joy rather than material things.

BREELYNN BROCK, GRADE 6

The Red Leather Wallet

My family’s heirloom is a red leather wallet, passed down by the men in my family. My great-grandfather received this wallet for Christmas when he was seven years old with twenty dollars inside. He kept it safe and put it up. Later, he decided to give it to his son, my grandfather. When he gave it to my grandfather, he also put twenty dollars inside. My great-grandfather told my grandfather he could save it or spend it. He told me he spent his twenty dollars on a baseball glove. On my seventh birthday, my grandfather gave it to me with twenty dollars inside. He told me the same thing, that I could save it or spend it. I saved it for a long time, but spent it on something I wanted. One day, if I have a son, I’ll give him the same wallet with twenty dollars inside. I’ll tell him he can either save it or spend it. I hope this family tradition continues, as it means a great deal to me.

BLAKE BRUMMITT, GRADE 6

My Grandmother’s Handmade Quilt

A long time ago, my great-great-great-grandmother made quilts with friends and family as gifts. She gifted one of her quilts, a multi-colored ring pattern, to her daughter as a wedding gift. My great-grandmother gave it to my grandfather, who then passed it on to my mother. This heirloom reminds me of how hard life used to be when they didn’t have machines to help them make quilts. This quilt has been in my family for generations and will one day belong to me. I want to remember my great-great-great-grandmother as I age. This quilt helps me feel a sense of connection to my family history. I want to keep it because it keeps me close to her.

THOMAS LANDEN BUCHMEIER, GRADE 6

The Story Behind My Family’s Heirloom

A long time ago, my great-great aunt went to a flea market and saw a black fairy sitting on a rock and decided to bring it home. It used to sit on her shelf when my mom was little. It has been in my family for about 40 years. This object originally belonged to my great-great aunt, was passed down to my mimi, and is now owned by my mom. I learned that this object is important to my family because we all like mythical creatures.

This heirloom reminds me of my mimi and mythical creatures because even though we can’t see them, it doesn’t mean they aren’t out there. One day, I hope this heirloom will be passed down to me because it helps me feel connected to my grandparents. I want to keep this object in my family because it can remind us of family members who are no longer here.

BRYSON BURTON, GRADE 6

Where I’m From

I am from the comfy black shirt I wear often that was a gift from my mamaw.

From Nike and Lego

I am from the white house with the hot tub porch and a brown roof

Loud, full of drama, makes me happy
 I am from the old oak tree in my old backyard
 that has seen many generations of family.
 I'm from Thanksgiving and sleeping in.
 From Tyler and Sharessa
 I'm from blue eyes, blonde hair, and freckles.
 From "The monster will get you!" and "You're grounded!"
 I'm from believing in God, sometimes going to the brown brick church in East Stone
 From Big Stone Gap, Virginia,
 pepperoni and cheese pizza,
 and my grandma's baked potatoes
 From the stories about family heroes and my dad saving our dog from a burning house
 The time on November 26, 2014, when I took my first steps
 on the walls and above the fireplace, and on phones
 Photos of family, vacations, and football
 because family is what makes me who I am.
 AUSTIN CAMPBELL-HARDY, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from basketball.
 From Tide detergent and Dove soap.
 I am from a cozy warm home,
 the sound of the bird singing,
 the scent of popcorn popping,
 and the feeling of family love at home.
 I am from the sun,
 Its yellow glow in the sky gives life and warmth to everything.
 I'm from Thanksgiving dinner and blue eyes
 From Paige and Curtis.
 I'm from the workers and doers.
 From "Don't talk to strangers." and
 "Don't answer the door if you don't know them."
 I'm from praising God at church.
 God has saved my life, and I'm so thankful.
 I'm from Big Stone Gap,
 a descendant of Ireland.
 biscuits and gravy and pizza
 From the story about the scar on my brother's chest from open heart surgery.
 The time I got chemo for my cancer.
 In photo albums are the pictures of all our family.
 It's good to remember and be told about family.

RAEGAN CARROLL, GRADE 6

The Amusement Park

Black was when I was on a roller coaster.
I smelled food, drank Coke, and had a great time
until I ate the pavement.
Black was when I went on a roller coaster,
I could hear the people screaming,
I could smell food and chlorine.
Black is the pain I felt when I hit the ground.

COY CHANDLER, GRADE 6

All About Landon

Landon
Funny, smart, nice
Relative of Amanda, Josh, and Harper
Lover of football, gym and history
Who feels happy, nervous, and sometimes bored
Who needs football, horses, and dirtbikes
Who gives support, love, and effort
Who fears heights and some snakes
Who would like to see New York and Florida
Resident of Appalachia
Chandler

LANDON CHANDLER, GRADE 6

The Color of My Life

Splish! Splash! fast raft,
Blue signs and big lines.
Music, laughter, after each fright
Screaming of joy
Sweet treat, bakery sweet
Slurping on a blue treat.
Sunscreen, popcorn sweet
As the sun set
Happiness
The fingers of my little brother
Wrapped around my thumb.

LEDGER CHESTER, GRADE 6

Colors of My Life

Blue is for calm family dinners.
The only sound loud chewing
Mom cooking in the modern kitchen

Eating around the family table
My mom, my three brothers, my sister, and me
Enjoying tacos on Tuesdays with Doritos and yellow cheese
Salads and cheese pizza
Blue is for feeling happy to be with family
enjoying their quiet company.
Green is for Christmastime spent with family.
Waking up early, opening presents
Making breakfast with my mom and sister
Eggs, bacon, sausage, and biscuits
Yummy!
After breakfast, chilling for a second
enjoying the presents until it is time for bed.
Green is for Christmas memories with my family.

JOSANNA CHILDRESS, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from the large, comfy bed with the white bedspread and pillows
where I sleep and watch FGTeeV Youtube
From Nike and Jordan
I am from the cat-infested house
Noisy, vanilla scents, cozy, safe, and comfortable
I am from the tall green grass in the side yard
I'm from trick or treating on Halloween and being curious
From my dad, Austin and my mamaw, Susan
I'm from walkers and fast eaters, finding presents behind the TV stand
From "Don't touch the elf!" and
"Turning on the lights in the car while driving at night is illegal!"
I'm from the country, eating mustard out of the packets at lunch,
and pickle sunflower seeds
From dad's Hamburger Helper and mom's mac and cheese
From the story about how my cousins are sometimes rude to each other
The time I fell down the wooden stairs when I was a toddler
Photos on the walls in my house and on tables
Love, because I won't ever be that tiny again.

AUSTIN CHRISTIAN, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from a soccer ball,
from Under Armour and Nike.
I am from the warm, lived-in house,
laughter in the kitchen,
the smell of brownies in the oven,
the feeling of safety and comfort.
I am from the redbud tree

standing tall by the road.
I'm from Saturdays spent riding dirt bikes and competitive spirits.
From Dad and Mom,
I'm from the finishers and helpers.
From "Treat others how you want to be treated," and "Never give up."
I'm from understanding that the universe is mysterious
and this creates a sense of wonder.
I'm from Big Stone Gap, Italian roots
pizza and cookies.
From the story about learning to ride my first dirt bike,
the time I scored my first soccer goal.
My keepsakes are in my top dresser drawer.
They remind me of who I am.

BRANSON CHURCH, GRADE 6

All About Kolton

Kolton
smart, athletic, kind
son to Sarina, brother of Krista
loves football, basketball, GOD
who feels happiest when playing football
Happy, loving, giving
who needs love, food and sleep
My favorite is mac and cheese
Who gives love and help
To my sister when she cleans my room for me
Who fears snakes, spiders, and math
Showing work is hard; I do the math in my head
Who would like to see Disney World, Hawaii
And go to an NFL game someday
Ravens vs. Steelers
Resident of Big Stone Gap
Clark

KOLTON CLARK, GRADE 6

The Origin of Roseann

My middle name is Roseann. Roseann is a compound name derived from the Latin word "Rosa," meaning "rose," and the Hebrew name "Hannah," meaning "grace" or "favor." Combining the two names, Roseann, means "graceful rose" or "favored rose." The name became popular in the United States during the 19th and 20th centuries, known as "Roseanne". Roseann is a spelling variation of the name "Roseanne", which is still a combination of two classic names. I was given the name Roseann after both of my great-grandmas, Rose and Annie. I feel that this name suits me, and it holds special significance because my grandfather came up with it for me. It helps me remember all of my grandparents and what they mean to me.

JACQUELINE ROSEANN CLASBY, GRADE 6

The Story Behind the Wagon Wheel

One of my heirlooms is a wagon wheel. The first person that had the wheel was my maternal great-grandfather. This wagon wheel was given to my papaw from his father and then given to my mom from her dad, and she still has it. One day she will give it to me, and I will keep it forever. It is important because my great-grandfather was a farmer by trade, and he used this wheel on a wagon pulled by horses to work his farm. My memories from this heirloom would be my mom using it for holidays and stories about my papaw using the wagon wheel to work. It is meaningful to me because I remember my papaw through the wheel, and it's cool to see its continued use in a different manner. When it is lit with Christmas lights, it feels as though my grandfather is still around. The wagon wheel represents my family's history as farmers, and it also represents us being hard workers. It will always serve as a reminder of our family circle.

KATHRYN CLENDENON, GRADE 6

What's in a Name?

My name is Berklei, which is kind of a unique spelling of the name 'Berkley.' That word comes from an Old English word that means "birch tree or meadow." This meaning connects to nature and gives my name a calm, peaceful feeling. When my older brother and I were little, we would gather the leaves together each fall to make a big pile. After all that work, we would enjoy jumping into the colorful leaves. It also reminds me of all the times my dad takes me fishing every summer. Sometimes, my brothers tag along, and sometimes, it is just me and my dad. We talk sometimes about upcoming trips or things that are going on in our lives. In summer, my mother and I usually go to the pool together where we tan, listen to music, or read. These are all peaceful ways that my unique name fits me.

My parents chose the name Berklei because they wanted something different and special that would stand out. In my opinion, my name does fit my personality because I like being creative, and I am usually pretty calm. I think my name connects me to the outside activities that I get to enjoy with my family.

BERKLEI COLLINS, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from the forty-year old brown Bible with a cross on the cover
that originally belonged to my grandmother
who would read stories and prayers to her children
reminding us of faith and traditions
From Sprite and Nike

I am from the house where when you wake up, you hear the sound of birds and coquí
Cheerful, the smell of salt in the air, warm feelings

I am from the sandy beaches and the feeling of the hot sun on my face
On the island of Puerto Rico,
From Arecibo and Hato Viejo

I'm from dancing bomba and salsa and family joy
From mother Johana Roman and father Juan Colon
I'm from the importance of family and strong roots
Christian faith with traditions passed down
From Spain and Puerto Rico
My mom's rice and beans and my dad's mofongo

From the story about how all my uncles and my grandfather served in the military
The time when my grandmother, who still lives in Puerto Rico,
showed me family photos and memories at her house
In the entryway, photos of my family, friends, and brothers and sisters
My family is important because they shaped the good person I am.

JABNEL COLON ROMAN, GRADE 6

Colors of My Life

White is the time I went camping in the woods
It was the view of a beautiful swinging bridge
It sounded like rushing water
White is the smell of the grass
I felt wet from the water under my feet
because it was a trip I will never forget

RYKER COOMER, GRADE 6

All About Lexi

Lexi
Kind, smart, and neat
Relative of Andrew, Aurora, and Chey
Lover of Jesus, mom, and dad
Who feels sad, happy, sick
Who needs love, mom, and dad
Who gives hugs
Who fears spiders, the dark, and being watched.
Who would like to see New York, Asia, and Europe.
Resident of Appalachia
Counts

LEXI COUNTS, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I'm from the small blue wooden treehouse where I love to draw and listen to music
From My Chemical Romance and Eminem
I am from the tan, wooden house in the middle of the forest on a dead-end road
loud, smells like homemade bread and tea, feels crowded but comfortable
I am from the cherry blossom tree in the front yard
Pink blooms every spring, reminds me of my Japanese heritage
From Auntie Sam and Pawpaw George
I'm from lighting incense to remember our ancestors and being loud
From "Sisters always help sisters." and
"情けは人のためならず" -Kindness is not for the sake of others."
I'm from worshipping Norse gods, making necklaces with their symbolic runes
From Japan, Germany, and Scandinavia

auntie's buckwheat soba and uncle's strawberry mochi
From the story about my dad who accidentally broke his bike
and had to walk all the way home, dropping the eggs
The time I accidentally got stuck in the basement
photos of ancestors in a small room
The roots that connect me.

KRYSTEN CRABTREE, GRADE 6

Grandmother Paula

I interviewed my Grandmother Paula to learn about her proudest moment, favorite memory, most significant life event, and daily routine as a child.

Paula's proudest moment is when her children graduated from high school and when her grandchildren were born. Her favorite memory is when her children got out of school and started a family. She has two kids: Nick Cress and Michael Cress, who is my dad. Michael is older than Nick, and Nick is in the Army, so we don't get to see him much. Her most significant life event was September 11, 2001. She was a teacher at the time, and school was canceled for the day. As a child, her mom passed away, but she was a good kid. She helped take care of the animals.

BROOKLYN CRESS, GRADE 6

Colors of My Life

Green is the calm grass with dew
On a calm spring day
Family laps around the Greenbelt in Big Stone Gap
Walking
A guy with a big bag of peanuts
Feeding the squirrels
My dad talking about the good old days
When he played football
At Addison High in Michigan
The helmet an heirloom to pass down
Each paw print sticker representing a touchdown
And giving me advice about life.
Green is memories with my dad in nature.

Pink is a warm summer day on the beach
My sister tans, and I swim to the very edge
Sitting on the ropes
I accidentally dropped my goggles
And I tried to swim down
Fifty feet, so far down
My hand is just a couple feet away from grabbing them.
Pink is memorable and happy with great beach moments to relive.

Blue is a calm night in the forest
Camping with my family

Under the stars
Waking up and mom making chocolate chip pancakes
Roasting smores at night
Chirping crickets and mourning doves singing
Fire crackling
Reminder of how western cowboys would sleep around the fire
In the old days
Blue is for family members around the campfire.

CONNOR CURTIS, GRADE 6

All About LJ

LJ
Friendly, thoughtful, cheerful
Brother to Gracie and Braxton
Loves video games like Fortnite, Take the L
Who feels happy dirt bike riding with dad
And feels tired in the mornings
Who gives help to mom cleaning dishes and dad working on his truck
Who fears skydiving, benchmarks, and heights
Who would like to see New York, South Korea, and China
Who lives in Southwest Virginia
Davis

JONATHAN "LJ" DAVIS, GRADE 6

All About Isaiah

Isaiah
Hilarious, athletic, kind
Relative of Jonathan and Jen Dearry
Lover of football, video games, and my favorite cousin
Who feels mad, sad, happy
Who needs football, my cousin to come over, my mom
Who gives help, money, and help cooking
Who fears heights, dying, and getting buried alive
Who would like to see my cousin, Union's football game, Dollywood
Dearry

ISAIAH DEARRY, GRADE 6

The Story Behind My Family's Iron Skillet

Do you have an heirloom that has been passed down? I have a unique one: a cast-iron skillet. It is very heavy and measures approximately 24 inches. It has been in my family for about 100 years. The skillet originally belonged to my great-great-grandmother. It was passed down to my great-grandmother on her wedding day. Now it is owned by my parents. I have learned that this object is important to my family because it has served many meals for over 100 years. This heirloom reminds my family of all the great meals that have been served. To me, this heirloom is special because the skillet has been providing meals for my family for many

generations and will continue to do so for many more to come. This special skillet will one day be passed down to me.

AYMES DEEL, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from dream catchers, from reservations, and grandparents.
I am from the calm
I am from the pumpkins, the weeping cherry tree
I am from not killing crickets in the house and green eyes, from Tom, Michele, and Deel
I am from long family dinners and always showing up for each other
From life happens in front of you, and choose the hard truth over the easy lie
I am from believing in Jesus and family Bibles
I am from Kingsport and Hungary, cream puffs and strawberry jam.
From the immigration at Ellis Island, the language barrier, and the Cherokee Indians.
I am from the curio cabinet of family heirlooms

SAWYER DEEL, GRADE 6

What's in a Name?

My name is Emma Elizabeth. I am named after my mom's mom, "Liz", and my mom's grandmother, Amy "Em." My mom was told by the doctors that she would never be able to have any children. My mom and dad prayed for a child, and they were blessed with me on September 27, 2013, after many years of heartache. My mom and dad made a deal. If I was a girl, my mom would pick my name. If I was a boy, my dad would pick my name. My mom chose Emma Elizabeth to honor both my grandmother and great grandmother.

Geraldine was called "Liz" by her family and friends and was born on January 21, 1938. Liz was very stubborn and athletic. She had blonde hair and blue eyes. Many people say I look a lot like her. She died on October 20, 2010, after battling cancer. I never got to meet her.

Amy "Em" was born on February 13, 1909. Amy liked to cook and crochet. My mom was only six years old when she died on April 27, 1977. My mom remembers the love she shared with her when she was young.

Even though I never met Liz or Amy "Em", my mom says I look like them both. I am happy my mom named me Emma Elizabeth to honor the two special people in her life.

EMMA EDWARDS, GRADE 6

Colors Of My Life

Black is sad to me like leaves on a dead tree.
The more I think, the more I grieve.
The more I think the more dead you are to me.
So long old friend bye bye farewell .
There were lots of stories to tell.
Again bye bye and a long farewell.

NORA ELY, GRADE 6

All About Easton

Easton
Cool, funny, nice
Relative of Leanna, Mckenzie, and Landon

Lover of family, animals, and sports
Who feels nervous, sad, happy
Who needs family, Jesus, and God
Who gives love, comfort, kindness
Who fears snakes, planes, and being in a room with a lot of people
Who would like to see Antarctica, Egypt, Africa
Resident of Big Stone Gap, Virginia
Fields

EASTON FIELDS, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from the big black couch in the living room where I have sleepovers with my friends
From Uggs and Dr. Pepper
I am from the big white three-story house
Loud, clean, and smells like pumpkin spice in the fall
I am from the red ruby stone, my birthstone for July
From eating chocolate candy on Halloween night and lots of laughter
From Caleb and Clearabelle
I'm from always singing Morgan Wallen country songs and talking
From "Life is not fair" and "Shhh"
I'm from church every Sunday in Wise
From Big Stone Gap, Memaw's chicken dumplings, and my beef tacos
since I like to cook
From the story about my great pap who died in the war
The time I did a backflip on the swing and broke my thumb
Photos in the family room
so I can remember my family.

CAROLINE FILLMORE, GRADE 6

The Porcelain Doll

I am a glass porcelain doll. I have blond hair, blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and a beautiful flowery dress. I was given to a little girl named Jean 80 years ago when she had a granddaughter. She still loved me, even when Jean packed me in a suitcase, and I traveled from England to America on a plane for the first time in forever. Then, she gifted me to a little girl named London, and I got to sit on her shelf. London loves me just as much! I hope when she has children or grandchildren of her own, she will pass me along.

LONDON FORESTER, GRADE 6

All About Aidyn

Aidyn
Funny, calm, energetic
Relative of Tiffany and Allen
Lover of chicken, trains, and Roblox
Who feels happy, nervous, sneaky
Who needs love, food, presents
Who gives love, laughs, joy

Who fears snakes, getting in trouble, and sunburn
Who wants to see Dollywood, Natural Tunnel, ski resorts
Resident of Big Stone Gap, Virginia
Funk

AIDYN FUNK, GRADE 6

All About McKenzie

McKenzie
Sleepy, quiet, annoyed
Relative of Troy, Jace, Nate, Emma, Allison, Elijah, and Jonathan
Lover of my cat, naps, and the outdoors
Who feels happy, confused, and sleepy
Who needs air, food, and water
Who gives friendship, happiness, and headaches
Who fears snakes, spiders, and bears
Who wants to see Hawaii, the Philippines, and Canada
Resident of Artisan Well Hollow Road
Gallihar

MCKENZIE GALLIHAR, GRADE 6

The Colors of My Life

Yellow the sound of her voice, soft like cotton candy.
White the hospital, blank with color, but
the hope my Mom had for me was beyond colors.

The joy and happiness in her voice when she saw me.
I couldn't smell anything, but what I felt was curiosity.

Orange is the color of the cloth
wrapped around me like a warm spiderweb.
The day of my birth.

GABRIEL GENTRY, GRADE 6

Colors Of My Life

Blue is listening to the calming ocean
and finding sea shells in the sand.
Blue is when I am able to find the perfect shell,
not yet stepped on or weathered by erosion.

Yellow is the sun on my skin
as I listen to music on my sea turtle beach towel
that I borrowed from a friend.

Hot pink is the feeling I get while boogie boarding after I catch a good wave.
Hot pink is finding a good seafood restaurant with unlimited crab legs
after a long day frolicking in the sun.

JASIE GILES, GRADE 6

All About Keyonna

Keyonna
Kind, chill, and friendly
Daughter of Will and Amber Greene
Lover of animals, K-Pop Demon Hunters, and my family
Who feels chill, happy, and serious
Who needs money, a new video game, and a bracelet kit
Who gives me dinner, gifts, and new clothes
Who fears spiders, snakes, and clowns
Who would like to see New York, Disney World, and Disneyland
Resident of Big Stone Gap
Greene

KEYONNA GREENE, GRADE 6

Colors of My Life

Orange is the wrong and the right in my life,
like a rainbow, sometimes pretty, sometimes not.
Orange is my gymnastics recital when I was ten years old
I thought that I couldn't do a front-walkover cartwheel back handspring step-out
and I did really well in spite of my doubt

Orange is like a theme park, really exciting, fun, and happy;
it feels like a rollercoaster,
excitement keeps going up, up, up.
Like the time I got new kittens when I was seven years old
grey, white and orange
I named them Snowstorm and Candy Corn
Feisty grey snowstorm with lots of attitude
Orange sweet cuddly ball of fluff always hanging out with me.

The color orange is the problems in my life,
like an argument getting worse and worse until it is okay.
Fights between my youngers sisters and me
Silly sibling fights saying words in songs
Orange in my life not perfect at all,
But orange is perfect for me.

LILY GREER, GRADE 6

The Story Behind My Family's Bible

My family has an old, worn-down Bible that has been passed down for many years. It originally belonged to my great-grandfather, Papaw James, who had it when he was a mechanic in the Korean War. My papaw was very nice. I remember always going to sleep in his arms when I was a baby. When he passed away in 2014, the Bible was given to my brother, Noah, who keeps it on a special shelf in his room. It sometimes makes me cry because I think about the tough situations he was in during the war, and he survived along with the Bible. It reminds me that sometimes faith can help you in difficult times.

HADLEY FAITH HALE, GRADE 6

All About Gavin

Gavin
Funny, joyful, athletic
Relative of brother, mom, and dad
Lover of sports, games, and girlfriend
Who feels happy, tired, and bored
Who needs my phone, dirt-bike, and PC
Who gives friendship, electronic advice, and care
Who fears wolves, tornadoes, and floods
Who would like to see Tokyo, Korea, and Los Angeles
Resident of Big Stone Gap, Virginia
Harmon

GAVIN HARMON, GRADE 6

All About Jaxxon

Jaxxon
Fast and funny
Relative of Thomas, Axel, Matilda
Lover of mom, dad, cat
Who feels happy, angry, playful
Who needs food, love, water
Who gives hugs, laughter, hope
Who fears lightening, roller coasters, and tsunamis
Who would like to see New York, South Korea, California
Resident of Big Stone Gap, Virginia
Harris

JAXXON HARRIS, GRADE 6

Colors of My Life

The colors of my life are sharp like a rose thorn.
My emotions are like a collage of colors,
the sun's yellow light like the laughter in my life.
The ocean's blue translucent waves remind me of the scary times in my life.
Pink in remembrance of the sunsets and the peace it brings.

AIDDRIHANNA HARTJE, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from Dr. Pepper.
From Jolly Ranchers and Bubblegum.
I am from the big concrete porch
the sound of rain falling on the roof
the vanilla candle burning sweetly.
My home feels welcoming, cozy, and warm.
I am from a pine tree.

It's very tall.
I'm from Christmas and blue eyes.
From Tiffany and Chris.
I'm from the workers and do-gooders.
From "Treat people how you want to be treated," and "Family comes first."
I'm from reading The Bible every night.
Luke 18:1.
I'm from Florida.
Native American heritage.
Tacos and pizza.
From the story about how my uncle's friend fell off Flag Rock and survived.
The time when my sister jumped off of a boat and cut her leg.
I keep my family pictures in a book and on my wall and mirror.
It is important to keep these family photos to make sure
I will never forget these memories.

SHYLA HARVEY, GRADE 6

My Family's Angel

My heirloom is an angel. It is a white woman wearing a pink robe. It's been in my family for about 20 years. My grandma originally had it, and now my mom has it because my grandma died. Maybe someday it will go to me. It is special to my family because my grandma had it since my mom was a child. My mom was 15 years old when my grandma died. The angel has always been a decoration. This heirloom reminds me of Grandma because it belonged to her. It makes me feel connected to my Grandma.

JAVONNA HOPKINS, GRADE 6

What's in a Name?

Hi, my name is Kaleb. It means someone who is faithful and whole-hearted. Faithful means that person is loyal and steadfast, but the other word to my name means to give a lot of support to people, such as "You have my whole-hearted support." I think my name fits me because I give a bunch of support to my friends, family, and people I don't even know. I am also loyal to everyone I meet including people I just met. That is the meaning of my name.

KALEB HOUGE-EHREDT, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from the soft brown couch in the living room where I play with Ellie, my baby sis
I am from Kool-Aid and Stanley cups
From the two-story brick house in Derby
My house is loud with barking and smells like pine
Candy cane Christmas trees every year
Reminds me of my time living in Florida
Walking the Appalachian Scenic Trail as a family
From Justin and Jennifer
Yearly visits from Aunt Jo Jo and her kids during the holidays
From "You hear me, boy?" and Christmas carols
Born in Indiana, roots in Florida and now Virginia

“Ping a ting a ting” hibachi on the grill that Ellie loves
Kano, my dog, has been with me through the high and lows
Memories of living with my Grandma and stealing her phone.

JUSTYN “JJ” HUBBELL, GRADE 6

Where I’m From

I am from the big, comfy blue couch in the living room
where I watch America’s Got Talent.
I’m from Mason jars and Ramen noodles.
I am from the little red roof house in Appalachia.
My house is quiet and smells like dogs.
I am from the gem stone topaz, a blue gemstone
reminds me of my birth month.
I am from going grape picking in early fall and being crafty painters
From Ryan and Linda
I am from saying movie lines from comedies and
singing country songs from Teddy Swims
From “Money doesn’t grow on trees” and “Life’s not fair”
Born in Lake City, Florida, belief in God, and my dad’s BBQ ribs made on the grill.
From stories of my parents growing up with their siblings
Playing video games with my brother
Photographs under the TV
Family pictures from when my papaw and mamaw were young
Memories of family

MASON JACKSON, GRADE 6

Anna Johnson, My Mom

I interviewed my mom, Anna Johnson, to learn about her proudest moment, favorite memory, most significant event, and daily routine as a child. She is most proud of her sons because they are smart young men. She enjoys watching us grow and develop our own personalities. It shows her she is doing something right in life. Her favorite memory is the days her children were born because she fully grew up and learned the meaning of love between a mother and child. The most significant event that happened in her life was the death of her grandmother. Her grandmother always helped her when she needed it, and it was sad to lose that support. Her daily routine as a child was doing the dishes and homework after school. She rode the bus to and from school in Pound, Virginia. If she did not get her chores or homework done, she would get her phone taken away.

BRAYDEN JOHNSON, GRADE 6

What’s in a Name?

What is in a name? My name is Roan Eathan Johnson. Historically, Roan came from Irish or Gaelic origin, describing a specific type of tanned sheepskin leather used in bookbinding. My parents chose that name because I was born off Roan Street in Johnson City. My father came up with Eathan because it was important to him for me to have the same initials as him. In my opinion, my name suits my personality because it is different, and so am I.

ROAN JOHNSON, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from the full-size comfy bed with blue covers in my room where I talk to my friends
I'm from Pizza Hut and Demon Slayer
From the two-story white house with a pool in the backyard
Creaky stairs, the smell of chlorine in summer, feels safe
I am from the purple flower garden
where my mom spends her time taking care on the weekends
From Halloween parties with friends and sleeping in
From Alexis and Lucas
I am from watching horror movies together at night and playing video games
From "Wake up!" and "6-7"
From Big Stone Gap, Virginia, lived here all my life
My mom's spaghetti and pepperoni pizza
From the times playing Roblox with my friends and
sleepovers with my cousin, Renny
Photos on the wall in the living room
Family pictures of my great-grandparents
so we can always remember them.

SIENNA JOHNSON, GRADE 6

My Home

The house I currently live in is a family heirloom. It is blue and old, and it has a pyramid shape. It has been in my family for about 110 years! The house belongs to my mom and is located in Big Stone Gap. It is very important to my family, and I hope that it will one day belong to me, so our family can continue to make memories in this special place.

CELLAN JONES, GRADE 6

Colors of My Life

Orange is the hot summer day on the Norton baseball field
hearing the crack of the bat
Black and white Spiders jersey
Number Zero, that's me
as the crowd cheers
seeing the ball soar through the air.
Orange is my life in sports.

Red is the warm embrace of my parents
Callie and Dallas
whether I win or lose
supporting me and encouraging me
to carry on no matter what.
McDonald's tradition after the game
Ten piece chicken nuggets, no sauce
Red, to me, is the support of my family.

Blue is the color of the water at Lake Lanier, Georgia
a week long break from school
riding in the pontoon boat
eight hours, all day every day
swimming in the lake,
cannonball into the cold water.
Blue is a fun, calming adventure with my family.

ZERO KENNEDY, GRADE 6

All About Greyson

Greyson
Funny, smart, athletic
Relative of dad, mom, and brother
Lover of Dakota, Maple, and Finn
Who feels happy, “rizzy”, hungry
Who needs sunflower seeds, root beer, and Old Bay seasoning
Who gives jokes, money and kindness
Who fears deep water, monsters in my closet, and death
Who would like to see the Mariana Trench, Aztecs, and Ireland
Resident of the woods
Kilgore

GREYSON KILGORE, GRADE 6

All About Silas

Silas
Funny, brainy, curious
Relative of Rhonda and Randall
Lover of food, 16-bit video games, and going outside
Who feels angry, silly, sad
Who needs food, water, and family
Who gives hugs, love, and humor
Who fears interstellar space, intergalactic space, teachers
Who wants to see Mars, New York, and International Space Station
Resident of Big Stone Gap, Virginia
Lambert

SILAS LAMBERT, GRADE 6

All About Ruben

Ruben
Adventurous, silly, likeable
Eleven brothers and sisters
Loves family, fishing, and hunting
Who feels happiest when hanging out with mom
And miserable in the early mornings before school

Who cares about family, friends, and pets
Who fears spiders, death, and talking to girls
Who would like to meet Josh Allen at an NFL game
Who always says “6-7” and “My best friend is short”.
Who lives in Big Stone
Lawson

RUBEN LAWSON, GRADE 6

All About Sophia

Sophia
Kind, bubbly, smart
Granddaughter to Tina and Ronnie
Lover of life, pink, Jesus
Who feels happy, helpful, amused
Who gives help, kindness, attitude
Who fears death, dark, silence
Who wants to see people spread the love of Jesus, help others, and spread kindness
Resident of the Valley
Lawson

SOPHIA LAWSON, GRADE 6

Mona Sue Wade

I interviewed Mona Sue Wade, my great great grandmother, who is 87 years old, to find out her proudest moment, favorite memory, most significant life event, and daily routine as a child.

Mona Sue’s proudest moment was the day her children were born healthy. Her favorite memory was the day she gave her life to Jesus. Her daily routine as a child included getting up in the mornings and helping her mother with breakfast. She carried coal from the fireplace to the kitchen for a cookstove. She walked to school, and she didn’t have a car until she was 10 years old. She went to a two-room school house at Meadow Fork in Keokee, Virginia. She got a television in 1952 and had to go up on a hill to get the signal to come in. She had a telephone, which was a party line. Anyone that had a phone could hear what was being talked about. She had an outside toilet.

NATALEE “VIOLET” LEWIS, GRADE 6

Where I’m From

I am from the tan house on the hill that has a brown roof.
From Mountain Dew and Converse
I am from the tiny wooden fan, the smell of roses,
and happiness as I step on my front porch.
I am from a leaf on the apple tree in my backyard, orange in fall
From celebrating Christmas and jovial vibes.
I am from the good and strict.
From Grayson and Polly .
From “Can’t let people in your way!” and “Stand up for yourself!”
I’m from all American, Virginia; peaches and pineapple

From the story about my big brother who needs his own space now
The time in 2020 when my dad brought home a new puppy named Fred
Photos on the television stand from my parents' wedding day
Important reminders of family.

MCKENZIE LIPPS, GRADE 6

All About Channing

Channing
Joyful, silly, kind
Son to Brandon and Tab
Loves playing Madden, football, and watching movies like The Waterboy
Who feels happiest when watching the Dallas Cowboys win a game
and proud whenever someone gives a compliment
Who cares about my cat Tiny, my parents, and my brother
Who fears God, mad women, and spiders
Who would like to go to a Dallas Cowboys game
and meet C.D. Lamb, George Pickens, and Dak Prescott
Who always says "6-7" and calls my best friend "E-Witt"
Who lives in Big Stone
Lovell

CHANNING LOVELL, GRADE 6

The Color of My Life

Orange is the color of his fur
Soft, long, and orange.
Charlie - playful, cuddly, and kind
Running through the yard.

Orange is the color of the sun rising
We wake up and mom is crying.
We don't understand.
Where is our playful dog?

Orange is the color of our salty tears
As we walk outside and our dog is on the ground.
We run to him. He isn't breathing.
Still as a statue. We sit there crying.

Orange is the color of our minds.
As we walk into school to take our minds off of him.
After school, we take him to the funeral home
A week later we got his ashes.

Orange is the color of this memory.
Orange is the color of his fur.
Orange is the color of our goodbyes.

Orange is the color of our tears.
He will be in our minds.
Always.

OLIVIA LUCAS, GRADE 6

Story of My Dad's Knife

A long time ago, my pap bought a Buck knife at the store. He passed it down to my dad when he was 12. My pap always said that a man should carry a knife. Dad said he would remember sitting in the living room watching his dad sharpen the knife while they were watching TV together.

I watch my dad do the same thing, and he has taught me how to do it. He passed the knife down to me when I turned 12. This heirloom reminds my family of all the memories of my papaw. To me, this heirloom is special because I was young when he passed away, and my dad tells me stories about him. It helps me feel connected to my pap. I want to keep this object in my family because times have changed, but memories last forever.

PEYTON MABE, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from the black PS4 where I play Fortnite
From Nike and Supreme
I am from the green house with white shutters
Loud, cozy, smells like cinnamon
I am from the tall green trees and small bushes around my home
From pumpkin carving every fall and having fun
I'm from Tori and Brenton
From the loud and the crazy
From "Love you" and "Good luck"
I'm from churches with Bibles
From Norton, steak, and chicken wings
From the stories about playing games with my papaw
And the times I opened presents with my mamaw
Family photos at Mamaw Baker's
Our family that we integrated.

BRENTLEY MAGGARD, GRADE 6

Rachel, My Grandma

I interviewed my grandma, Rachel, to learn about her proudest moment, favorite memory, most significant event, and daily routine as a child. Her proudest moment is when she got her first car. Her favorite memory is when she went to the beach years ago. The most significant event in her life was September 11. As a child, she rode the bus to school. There was not that much technology - only computers.

ELIJAH MALONE, GRADE 6

My Grandpa's Baseball Trophies

Upstairs in the guest room, my grandpa's baseball trophies are on display. They have been in my family for about 30 to 40 years. They belonged to my grandpa from his baseball league where he used to play. He started

playing baseball when he was just eight or nine years old, and he still shows people his trophies because he is proud of them. My grandpa keeps the trophies at his mom's house. They are important to my family because they bring back happy memories of playing baseball when he was young. These trophies are special to me also because they remind me of my grandfather and how I used to play softball with him when I was younger. I want to keep the trophies for memories and to pass them down from generation to generation.

PYPER MARKS, GRADE 6

Smiley Mylee

My name is Mylee. I was not named after anyone in particular. The reason I was named Mylee is that my parents liked two different names, Amelia and Molly, so they compromised and settled on Mylee. Mylee means "smiley" and "happy." It definitely fits my personality! Everyone calls me "Smiley Mylee."

MYLEE MCCOWAN, GRADE 6

All About Sophia

Sophia

Straight hair, hazel eyes, pierced ears

Relative of the McCowan, McCoy, and Shell family

Lover of basketball, anime, and boxing

Who feels anger, happiness, and shyness

Who needs friends by my side and food

Who gives money, happiness, and presents to those in need

Who fears being lost, being eaten by a tribe of cannibals, and asking out my crush

Who would like to see Afghanistan, Africa, and Europe

Cherokee heritage

McCowan

SOPHIA MCCOWAN, GRADE 6

My Nana's Green Bean and Potato Soup

My nana, Delilah, makes the best soup. It is made with green beans, potatoes, and water. It is very simple, but it still tastes so good. The first time she made it for me, I was five years old. She came over to my house and handed me a bowl while I was sitting on the porch. I thought it was good, so I ate it all and asked for some more. She has only made it twice since then because we don't get to visit her very often, but I always enjoy it. I know that my nana makes it with love and care, so it reminds me of her. She looks like Dolly Parton.

KOLTON MCGRAW, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from football.

From Nike and Apple.

I am from the bright green grass in the front yard,

the banging of pots and pan in the kitchen,

the smell of cookies in the oven,

the cozy fireplace keeps me safe and warm.

I am from the birch tree,

the smell of wood.

I'm from movie night and hard workers.

From Deonna Fellows and Timothy McMahan.
I'm from the hard workers and cleanaholics.
From "All girls are mean," and "Finish everything on your plate."
I'm from my uncle, the pastor.
I thank God for forgiving me for my sins everyday,
I'm from Appalachia.
Irish heritage,
pork chops and fish.
From the story when my sister and I were a mile deep in the woods
and three coyotes jumped out at us, but we made it home safely.
The time my dad jumped on desks at school and yelled "Kowabunga!"
In a binder are family photos
for my future kids to learn about their past.

SAMUEL MCMAHAN, GRADE 6

What's in a Name?

My name is Clayton Phoenix Messer, and this is the story of my name. My first name was going to be River, which was named after one of my mom's friends who was always happy, cheerful, and joined the Peace Corps, but my name was changed because someone with the same name committed some crimes. My new name was going to be Clayton named after the clay in the ground. My last name is Messer (which in German means knife). And lastly is my middle name, Phoenix. My parents chose this name because Phoenix means rebirth, and when I was born, my parents became new people. I am very happy to have my name because it has history.

CLAYTON MESSER, GRADE 6

Tiger

My grandma's friend gave me a plushie when I was six months old, and I still have it today. It was used as a baby toy for me, but now it serves as an emotional support stuffed animal. This reminds me of my family when I was a baby, because I've had it since I was six months old. To me, this stuffed animal is special because I have a strong attachment to it, as I've had it for 11 years. It helps me connect to my early childhood, and I hope for it to become a family heirloom. I want to keep this object in my family because I love my plushie. One day, I plan to pass this plushie, Tiger, to my future sibling.

JOLENE METZ-LANE, GRADE 6

What's in a Name?

My first name is Dalee. It is a unique name. I was named after my papaw. His name is David Lee, and he is my mom's dad. He just passed away this year. I remember that he used to play tag with my brothers, sisters and me. We used to have snowball fights with him in the winter. That was a lot of fun! He would also go bottle hunting and would collect old bottles that he found. Once, I got to go with him, but I didn't find anything cool. It took a lot of patience to find those old bottles. My name, Dalee, is a blend of his first and middle name. In my opinion, my name does fit my personality because it reminds me of my papaw and is unique. Just like my name, I am one of a kind.

DALEE MILLER, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from the Serafina and the Seven Stars book on the pink desk in my room

From Coke and Reese's
 I am from the gray trailer with front and back porch
 Sounds like television and video games, smells clean, feels safe and comfortable
 I am from my dog, Candy, a playful chihuahua
 From fireworks on the 4th and happiness
 From mom, Desi, and dad, Chris
 I'm from the love of video games and reading
 From "I love you, Renny" (from family) and "Bully!" (from my cousin, Dalton)
 I'm from believing in God and Jesus
 From Virginia and Puerto Rico, papaw's tacos and mamaw's chicken casserole
 From the story about my great (times four) grandmother, Estelle, who saved a neighbor's cow
 in 1930 by holding its head above the water with a stick during a flood
 Photos on the wall in the living room
 help me remember happy times.

SERENITY MONTANEZ, GRADE 6

Grandma's Ring

The heirloom I chose is my great grandmother's ring. It is a pink ring that has been in my family for about 10 years. This object originally belonged to my great-great grandma. It came from Texas. It was passed down to my grandma from my great-grandmother before she passed away from cancer. Now it is owned by my mom. I learned that this object is important to my family because it is how we remember my great-grandmother. My mom will pass down the ring to me when I turn 18.

MADILYNN MOSLEY, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from the white couch where I watch Lucas, the Spider with my little brother
 From Dr. Pepper and Nike.
 I am from the white house in the southern in Big Stone Gap.
 noisy, loud, creaky but also quiet,
 smells like pizza and feels like happiness.
 From the cast iron skillet passed down by my great-great grandma
 I am from the flowers that I planted with my grandma.
 Pink, purple, blue, and yellow in front of my house.
 I'm from Halloween when we go trick-or-treating and sassiness.
 From Grandy and Uncle Lee.
 I'm from not cleaning up after myself and talking back.
 From "Don't lie" and "Don't talk to strangers."
 I'm from crosses everywhere, in every room.
 From Lonesome Pine Hospital, Cherokee Indian,
 tacos on Tuesday, and Grandy's chicken fajitas.
 From the story of my great-great uncle Nuite who saw a sasquatch
 while he was using the outhouse.
 The time I did my first back handspring/aerial.
 Photos in the living room and on my grandma's phone,

reminders of my family heritage.

ALLIYAH MULLINS, GRADE 6

All About Jase

Jase

Athletic, kind, funny

Relative of mom, dad, two brothers, and two sisters

Lover of football, basketball, and dodgeball

Who feels hyper, happy, and good

Who needs water, food, and friends

Who gives kindness, happiness, and comedy

Who fears heights, sharks, and snakes

Who would like to see an NBA game, New York, and Texas

Resident of Norton

Mullins

JASE MULLINS, GRADE 6

All About Mia

Mia

Kind, shy, and smart

The sibling of Marissa, Jacob, and Jackson.

Lover of video games, family, and friends

Who feels happy when playing games and drawing pictures

Who needs to be comfy at home and have positive emotions

Who gives kindness, positivity, and help to others

Who fears heights, being alone in public, and the ocean.

Who likes to visit the mall, Olive Garden, and Just Jump

Resident of my loving home in Virginia

Mullins

MIA MULLINS, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from a computer.

From Chrome and Google.

I am from the bricks,

My dad snoring at night,

The smell of Cheerios,

And roughness.

I am from the grass.

It's everywhere, green, and smells weird.

I'm from "Odomis" and brown hair.

From Kelly and Anthony.

I'm from strictness and goodness.

From "Put your feet down," and "Brush your teeth."

I'm from learning a lot

and I'm thankful for my learning experiences.
I'm from Fredericksburg,
a descendant of Puerto Rico,
rice pilaf and chicken nuggets.
From the story about Soaky Mountain when I rode Rainbow Revenge
for the second time.
The time we went to Universal and got to shoot at Minions.
In photo albums and boxes are pictures, mementos, and keepsakes
to help us remember.

KAEDEN ODOM, GRADE 6

Blue

Blue is the beach chair listening to the loud waves.
Blue is an ice cream cone as we walk back laughing to the hotel.
Blue is the bag full of stuff as we shop.
Blue is the nighttime sky getting ready for the next day.

HADLEY OWENS, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from the big wooden desk in my room
that belonged to my mom when she was a teenager
From Nike and Adidas
I am from the big yellow two-story on a quiet street
The vrr-vrr of the vacuum, birds chirping, cats meowing, feels comfortable
I am from the yellow sunflowers in my mom's garden
reminds me of summer
I'm from opening presents and visiting family on Christmas and always busy
From Lance and Trinity
I'm from never quiet and always working
From "Treat people the way you want to be treated," and
"Always be there for people when they need you."
I'm from believing in God, working and cleaning all the time
Mom's spaghetti and cheese pizza
From the trip to Minnesota to visit family
The time I watched scary videos that made me cry with my siblings.
My nana's shelf.
It holds pictures of my deceased great-grandparents.

SERENITY PARSONS, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from sneakers.
From Nike and Vans.
I am from a new and unpainted home.
No sounds,
No smells,

my home feels like a home.
I am from plants.
They are red.
I'm from my birthday at Thanksgiving,
and blonde hair during cold seasons.
Brenda and Debra Hatfield
People pleasers and workaholics
"Santa is real" and "The tooth fairy is real."
My religion is Christianity.
I pray every day.
I'm from Appalachia,
a descendant of the Hatfield and Patton families.
bread and bacon
From the story about the 1863 Hatfield and McCoy family feud
Family pictures in a cabinet
so I can look at them in the future.

ETHAN PATTON, GRADE 6

Colors of My Life

Purple, my sister's favorite color, is the night sky on school nights.
The way stars dance when most are sleeping
It is truly amazing how the most beautiful things
are present
when most are not there to see it.

Blue is my summer Destin trip with my dad and sister.
The warm, summer water is cool on my hot legs
buying a rubber duck and plushie turtle
at the gift shop
going to really fancy restaurants
ordering steak, medium rare
getting a new version of Monopoly:Cheater's Edition
He won because
he was the penguin character.
That's usually my pawn.
Oh, how I love the colors of my life!

OLIVIA PEDIGO, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from my pink polka dot baby blanket that sits on my bed.
From Dr Pepper and Celsius.
I am from the house with a flower painting on the wall.
Loud laughter, watermelon aroma, sweet relief as I walk in the door.
I am from the pine trees that my seven siblings and I climbed when we were little.
I'm from crowded Christmas breakfasts and delightful Thanksgiving dinners.

From Tydesha and Bryan.
I'm from the always boisterous and vivacious.
From you are my "sugar booder" and you are my sunshine.
I'm from going to church on Wednesdays and Sundays.
I'm from Franklin Woods Community Hospital in Tennessee.
My grandma's macaroni and cheese and my grandpa's home made chilli,
with just the right amount of spice.
From the story about my great-grandfather,
who worked in the coal mines and fought in WWII.
I'm from the hours I've spent playing outside with my siblings.
The beautiful flower painting on the wall that reminds me how precious life is.

KINSLEY PFEIFFER, GRADE 6

Heroes and Heirlooms

Around 50 or 60 years ago in Texas, my great grandfather, Paul Ray Peters, was given a model ship of the USS Constitution to help with his recovery after his first heart attack. He served in the military during World War II, the Korean War, and in Vietnam. At home, he displayed the model with his war medals. It was passed down to my mamaw and my father. One day it will be mine. It is special because it reminds me of my great-grandfather, who I never got to meet, but I am proud to be the great granddaughter of an American hero. The ship reminds me of what he had to overcome in the wars and in his life. I hope someday I will never forget and can pass the ship down along with the memories.

ISABELLE "IZZY" POWERS, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from Chickenman.
From Tide and Downy.
I am from a two story home.
My house sounds like YouTube,
and smells like popcorn.
My home is a safe place.
I am from elephant ears and roses.
Yellow and beautiful.
I'm from a coal mining family and brown eyes.
From Amy and Jesus.
I'm from hard workers and proud, honest people.
From "Stay away from the candy van," and
"Always say your prayers."
I am from a Christian family.
God blesses me every day, and I praise Him daily.
I'm from Wise, Virginia.
Mashed potatoes, steak, and gravy and biscuits.
From the story about my grandparents owning a coal mine
And now they have a hard time breathing.
On the walls and in the cedar chest

Are family pictures, mementos, and keepsakes.

NOAH POWERS, GRADE 6

What's in a Name?

My name is Allisyn Grace, and this is the story of the origin of my name. My grandmother and her friend named me. My name was originally supposed to be spelled Allyson, but my grandmother and her friend suggested to my mother that she spell it Allisyn. My middle name is Grace because it is the gift God gives us. It also means blessing. I am really happy my grandmother suggested the spelling change. I know a part of her is always with me. In my opinion, my name doesn't fit my personality because I am sensitive, clingy, heartfelt, intelligent, extroverted, and funny. To me, the name Allisyn sounds like a calm, introverted, hard-hearted, and silent person. I am the opposite of that.

ALLISYN PRICE, GRADE 6

All About Brandon

Brandon

Helpful, silly, caring

Who loves video games like ARK and pranking sisters

Who feels happiest going to Richmond

And tired every day, even when sleeping

Who cares about Jabnel, Breelynn, and G

Who fears getting bad grades

Who would like to visit Puerto Rico and Japan

Who always says "I'm cooked!" everyday

Who lives in Southwest Virginia

Ramey

BRANDON RAMEY, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from fallen leaves.

From Twix and Pillsbury.

I am from the woods

The creek flowing.

The smell of pumpkin candles

and the feeling of safety.

I am from dogwood trees and azaleas,

Their pink fragrant petals fill the air with sweetness.

I'm from pumpkin carving and blue eyes,

From Megan and Taylor.

I'm from hard workers and dog lovers.

I'm from "Be kind" and "Focus."

I'm from Christianity,

and it makes me feel a bit unsure of what to believe in sometimes.

I'm from Virginia.

Pizza and steak.

From the story about the grandpa who fought in Korea and Vietnam,
who played guitar overseas because he missed music so much.
The time my dad got a tattoo from his brother to help him learn the skill
In the special cabinets and closets are family pictures and keepsakes
too valuable to forget.

KARLI RAMEY, GRADE 6

Playing at the Beach

Orange is the warm evening sun kissing the soft sand
Waves crashing in before the still of the night
Orange is the warmth I feel on my face as a new day begins
Building castles, boogie-boarding, letting the fun roll in

KENNEDY REED, GRADE 6

All About Brantley

Brantley
Fun, athletic, playful
Relative of mom, dad, and papaw
Lover of football, baseball, and recess
Who feels good, hyper, and mad
Who needs snacks, drinks, and fresh air
Who gives hugs, love, and gifts
Who fears sharks, snakes, and ants
Who would like to see Disneyland, Bigfoot, and the NFL
Resident of Avenue East
Rentfrow

BRANTLEY RENTFROW, GRADE 6

The Origin of Eva

All names have a back story or reference to someone or something or names that have important meanings behind them, or maybe your parents just liked them. My name is Eva, and my name comes from two things: my grandmother and the Bible. My grandmother's name is Evelyn, and my name is also based on a woman in the book of Genesis (in other words, Eve). My name comes from a Hebrew word "chava" meaning life or living one, but my name also comes from an Italian word that means "happy joyful women" which is the meaning my mom liked. My middle name coordinates with my first name. My middle name, Brooke, stands for babbly, happy soul. In conclusion, yes, I do think my name represents my personality. The origin of it is important to me to know because I get to see why my mom gave me that name.

EVA ROGERS, GRADE 6

Colors of My Life

Green is the trail that is closed and the path we hike.
Tired and sweaty but we still go on.
Green trees, leaves, and bugs all around.
Mom and dad telling me to come on.
Climbed a gap and stung by nettles.

Making memories that will last forever.

Tan is the neverending sand at a Florida beach
Building sandcastles in sand that burns me
Swimming in the ocean with my best friend
We were mermaids, playing pretend
with my mermaid tail my parents bought me
Tan is the color of my fond memory.

ADDISON SANTOS, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from the big, dark gray couch where I watch movies with my mom
From Ramen and Nike
I am from the normal-size white house with stone on the bottom.
Five dogs barking, clean and fresh, messy but comfy.
I am from the red roses in my backyard I loved to smell when I was little.
I'm from birthday dinners and sarcasm.
From Aunt-B and Will
I'm from funny and sarcastic.
From "Don't sit too close to the TV" and "Ma'am".
I'm from church on Sunday, Christian.
From Kingsport, Tennessee, parents born in Big Stone Gap,
mom's cheesecake and mamaw's chicken dumplings.
From the story about Mamaw going to Johnson City on a bumpy road
and had to pee, but her dad wouldn't stop.
The time Mamaw and I were making dumplings.
On the wall, pictures
memories were saved.

CHARITY SMITH, GRADE 6

My Favorite Memory

One of my favorite memories is the first time my mom, dad, and I went to Panama City, Florida, for summer vacation when I was about six or seven. We stayed for about a week and spent most of the time at the beach. The ocean was clear, and you could really see all the colorful fish in the water. It was fun until I saw a jellyfish, so I jumped out of the water because it scared me. Then, I went to play in the sand to build sandcastles. The next day, we left to go home, and this trip became our family tradition. Now, we go every year to continue to make memories. When I become an adult, I want to continue this tradition with my family.

KHLOE SMITH, GRADE 6

Lois Spears

I interviewed Lois Spears to learn about her proudest moment, favorite memory, most significant life event, and daily routine as a child.

Lois is most proud of her accomplishments and earning a degree in nursing. Her favorite memory is seeing her great nephew and nieces born. The most significant event in Lois's life was going to Costa Rica and helping

build schools with her church. Her daily routine as a child was going to school, cooking, taking care of siblings, playing outside, doing chores, and sleeping.

HARRY SPEARS, GRADE 6

Color of My Life

Blue is the time I went to Virginia Beach
There was sand and water everywhere
Blue is the sound of the waves hitting and crashing into land
The smell of the nearby restaurant made me hungry
The feel of the water was cold on my skin

IAN SPROLES, GRADE 6

All About Hadley

Hadley
Compassionate, dramatic, likeable
Who loves theater, plushies, and Xbox
Who feels happiest when seeing friends
And nervous without a plushie
Who has the nickname Lotus
Who cares about friends and family
Who fears only heights
Who would like to see California
Who would like to perform on stage
Who lives in Appalachia
Stacey

HADLEY STACEY, GRADE 6

All About Haeden

Haeden
Funny, kind, pretty
Relative of mom, dad, grandma, my sister and brother
Loves Cheez-its, family, and cooking good food
Who feels sleepy, happy, pretty
Who needs croissants, food, and sleep
Who gives happiness, kindness, and laughs
Who fears the quiet at night, loneliness, and clowns
Who wants to see Tokyo, Paris, and Rome
Resident of Big Stone Gap, Virginia
Stanley

HAEDEN STANLEY, GRADE 6

Colors of My Life

Black is the Christmas I got my two dirt bikes
when I was nine.
My mamaw woke me up

and took me downstairs
 I was surprised and happy to see
 One black and one green
 It was just what I wanted!
 I learned to ride my dirt bike
 My grandpa put me on it
 He told me how to turn it on
 He showed me how to use the clutch
 I still have my two dirt bikes
 I ride them when I go to mamaw's house
 Black is my memory of riding my dirt bikes

Red is the time I went to the beach
 when I was eight
 My big brother, Cody, and I went out far
 into the ocean
 While we were at the beach
 a big storm hit
 It was pitch black
 You couldn't see anything
 It was like night.
 Thunder and rain sounded so loud.
 Red is the memory of a storm on the beach.

OWEN STANLEY, GRADE 6

Origin of Ayvrie

Have you ever wondered what your name means? My name means "elf ruler" or "elf counsel." It's pretty weird, I know. Let's talk about it.

I was named after a baseball player. His name is Steve Avery. He is a former Major League Baseball left-handed pitcher who played 11 seasons in the majors from 1990 to 2003.

He was born in 1970, and he is still alive. He played for several teams, including the Atlanta Braves, Boston Red Sox, and Cincinnati Reds, among others. He played for the Atlanta Braves the most, where he spent the majority of his MLB career from 1990 to 1996. He was a standout pitcher for the Braves, becoming part of their famous pitching staff in the early 1990s and helping them win the 1995 World Series.

Now that I look at my name, I can picture me being a pro pitcher just like how Steve Avery was.

AYVRIE STRENGTH, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from sugar,
 From Dawn soap and Gain detergent.
 I am from white walls and wood floors,
 the sounds of floors creaking,
 the smell of pumpkin spice in the air,
 and the feeling of love, safety and comfort.
 I am from butterfly bushes,

green with purple butterflies.
 I'm from Halloween and blue eyes
 From Brian and Mazy
 I'm from the mechanics and truck drivers
 From "What goes around comes around" and
 "Everything in the dark does come to light."
 I'm from singing "This Little Light of Mine" in church.
 And growing up helping with volunteer work.
 I'm from Kingsport,
 the Strong family
 Spaghetti and chicken.
 From the story about burning buildings and saving cats from trees
 The time an apartment caught fire and a family was saved.
 Photo albums and picture frames hold precious memories
 Of people I want to remember.

HAILEY STRONG, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from the bone cross that hangs on the wall of my bedroom.
 From Sony and Microsoft.
 I am from a medium-sized white house with a shiny black metal roof.
 The sound of the AC blasting, leaves fluttering through the yard
 while I sit happily on the porch.
 I am from the surprise lily that popped up this spring
 a long neck with white and red flowers.
 I'm from Super Bowl parties and mean-spirited taunting.
 From Tamsyn and Ben.
 I'm from loving and caring.
 From "Santa and the Easter bunny are real, so long as we believe."
 I'm from Christianity with Jewish ancestry.
 Dad's soup and mom's meatloaf.
 From the story about when I killed a newt.
 The time I watched scary videos that made me cry with my siblings.
 My nana's shelf.
 It holds pictures of my deceased great-grandparents.

DECKLAN SURBER, GRADE 6

All About Willow

Willow
 Cheerful, energetic, and outgoing
 Relative of Kisha and David
 Lover of all things cheer, a good night's rest, and sleepovers
 Who feels appreciated, capable and content
 Who gives attitude, adventure, and audacity
 Who fears dying in my sleep, losing a friend, and getting left out

Who would like to roam North Carolina, experience Lady Liberty, and explore Europe
Resident of a cozy home in a friendly neighborhood
Swiney

JACELYNN "WILLOW" SWINNEY, GRADE 6

Colors of My Life

Red is for the time we took a family trip to Cincinnati
to watch the Reds play a baseball game
Orange is for Union's colors and watching football games at Bullitt Park
Yellow is for my favorite season, summer, when it's always sunny
Green reminds me of my mom because her favorite color is green
and she loves all things green
Blue is my favorite color and the other half of Union's colors.
Indigo is for the evening sky and catching lightning bugs
Violet because I love purple grapes and grape ice breaker gum

ELI TABOR, GRADE 6

All About Haylee

Haylee
Tired, hungry, silly
Relative of Emily and mom
Lover of bread, sleep, and the end of school
Who feels natural, bored, and very sleepy
Who needs sleep, food, and H2O
Who fears being alone
Who would like to see New York, Russia, and Colorado
Resident of a small but big enough home
Tackett

HAYLEE TACKETT, GRADE 6

All About Kuechly

Kuechly
Chill, quiet, funny
Relative of Mom, Dad, Bishop, Olivia, and Grayson
Lover of R6, Skate 4, and my phone
Who feels happy, nervous, and excited
Who needs food, water, and land
Who gives friendship, happiness, and support
Who fears snakes, dogs, and my cat named "Taco" (and he is scary...)
Who wants to see Lebron, Dollywood, and New York
Resident of Big Stone Gap, Virginia
Thier

KUECHLY THEIR, GRADE 6

Where I'm From

I am from the family photo tree hanging on the wall in my dining room
From Lululemon and Nike
I am from the large tan house with the giant kitchen where I cook with my mom
Loud, busy, smells like cinnamon in fall and flowers in spring, feels cozy and warm
I am from the dandelions in spring that cover the yard near the old shed.
I'm from football year-round and always busy
From Brayden and Hannah
I'm from always early and very friendly
From "Have a good attitude" and "Treat people the way you want to be treated."
I'm from Florida and Puerto Rico, belief in God
Mom's mac and cheese, and Dad's black beans and rice with beef
From the story when my dad worked on a farm when he was younger
The time I hit my first home run in softball when I was ten
Family photos hang on the wall in the living room
Memories.

ARIANNA TIRADO-HATFIELD, GRADE 6

All About Hailey

Hailey
Fun, motivated, athletic
Relative of mom, dad, three stepsisters, and three brothers
Lover of football, basketball, and softball
Who feels happy, excited, or sad
Who needs help, water, and time
Who gives kindness, help, and friendship
Who fears spiders, cockroaches, and bugs
Who would like to see the beach, the Eiffel Tower, and Mars
Resident of a big gray home
Tompkins

HAILEY TOMPKINS, GRADE 6

The Colors of My Life

White is the color I see
When the planes fly above me.
It smells like fresh air and summer.
The sky is blue like one of the planes.
Just my dad and me watching them fly,
High in the sky.
Watching them take off and land.
I had the most fun in the land.
I loved it so much.
I wish I could go back to that time.
My dad and me

Happy and free.
Oh! I loved it so much when I was little
Oh! I miss watching them fly around.
Oh! I miss watching them land.
So every time I look at the sky, I think
How do they fly so high?
Fast forward, six years, I still remember the
planes going up high like deer.
Oh! Every night I wish I could go back
to those days with my dad and me.

KENNEDY TRENT, GRADE 6

My Heritage: Heirlooms and Names

Google says my name, Brynlee, means “burnt meadow” or “hill meadow”, but in reality, my name holds a lot more heritage and meaning than just what Google says. The Lee in Brynlee is from my dad. That is his middle name, so I was named after him. My mom chose Brynlee as my name because she loved it and wanted my middle name to be Mae. It is also a family name on her side. I am named after my Mamaw Glenna, my mom’s mom, who died before I was born and my great-great-aunt Willie Mae, who is a relative on my dad’s side.

My family heritage is also found in an heirloom of a drawn picture at my house. Zander on my dad’s football team, the Union Bears, drew a picture of my papaw, Tom. It was a picture of my papaw Tom coaching an Appalachia Bulldogs football game. He was the coach just like my dad. My papaw Tom is my dad’s dad, and this heirloom is important because my papaw Tom died before I was born. So many memories are in that picture, but unfortunately, I never got to experience any of them; my brothers had memories with him, but I didn’t. The image represents how strong my papaw Tom was. It was an amazing drawing, and the person who drew it gave it to my dad because they wanted to do something special for my dad. This heirloom is meaningful to me because he was my papaw and I love him even though I never got to tell him that. The image represents how strong and loved he was, and how much my dad is appreciated by his players. Football is a legacy in my family.

BRYNLEE TURNER, GRADE 6

Origin Of My Name

My name is Sierra. My name is important to me because it means strength, resilience, and a connection to nature like a rugged mountain range. My name fits my personality, and I also like my name because I think it is the best name ever. My name was Alex, but my mom said that when I was little, she always called me Sierra. It stuck, and today I am proud to be called Sierra.

SIERRA WAYCASTER, GRADE 6

Where I’m From

I am from Disney World
From Mickey Ice Cream and Chewbacca.
I am from the red brick house.
From the yellow rose and the white rose.
I am from waking up my parents on Christmas morning to open presents
I’m from dark brown hair

From Greg Large and Autumn Large-Fox.
I'm from a family who look alike and have the same eyes.
From if I did not go to sleep, Krampus was going to eat me
and that if I made that face again, it was going to get stuck.
I am from Christianity.
From Tennessee, mashed potatoes and pork chops.
From my papaw who fought in Sicily, Italy,
which is where my mom and sister got their middle name from.

LUCCA WELLS, GRADE 6

Hundred Days Project

When I was in kindergarten, the class assigned a project to celebrate the first hundred days of school, so my family and I got to work. We decided to build a bookshelf with one hundred books representing one hundred numbers. Three weeks in advance, we got some pieces of wood, and my father sanded each one down and cut them to size. After that, we screwed it together and put the shelves in it. Then, my dad cut two hundred small pieces of wood for each side of the little books. Then, it was mine and my mom's turn. We cut 100 sheets of little colored paper. First, we painted the wood white like paper. Then, we wrapped them in colored paper sheets. After that, we covered each one in clear tape, so the little books could open and close. Then, we put the number on the side. On the inside, we put the number in word form and number form. Then, we got three blocks that said ABC on them. Finally, I drew little pictures on six sticky notes to decorate the sides of the bookshelf. While we waited for the individual books to dry, we stained the wood a dark color. Then, we put the books on the shelf in order. This took three weeks to make, but I got an A, and my teacher loved it. Now, it is something I can show to my friends and family. It reminds me of a happy time I worked together with my family.

ABRIANA "ABREE" WHITTEMORE, GRADE 6

Family Heirloom: Musical Heritage

My family's heirloom is a potato-bug mandolin belonging to my great-great grandmother, Orpha Powers Ireson. My family does not know where she purchased the mandolin, but we do know that it was made in 1903, which could hint which era it was from. It was passed down to my mom because she carried on the musical tradition. The mandolin is so important to my family because my grandmother was a part of Fiddling Powers Family, which was the first band to record in the 1920s. The members of the band were Mamaw Orphy, her father, brother, and two sisters. The mandolin is on display in the Country Music Hall of Fame.

JULIETTE WILLIAMS, GRADE 6

My Mamaw

In searching for words to describe my great grandmother that I called "Mamaw", I realized that she had many gifts. She had the gift of teaching, the gift of service and mercy. She was always kind and gentle, a loving Mamaw. She had an outstanding character and a will of iron, tempered with true humility and a sincere desire to use her abilities to help others. She touched many lives in her 100 years here on this earth. She was from Appalachia, Virginia, a coal miner's daughter, an only child, a strong Christian, and a loving mother and wife. She owned a restaurant in my hometown, Big Stone Gap, Virginia, called the Bus Terminal Cafe, and a special portrait of her with this cafe hangs in her old home, though all I knew of her was a hug from next door. By the time I was born, my Mamaw was older, way up in age, but her love never faded. She was a kind and genuine

woman who loved and cared for those around her. I sure do miss my hugs from next door, but I know I come from a long line of strong women that all began with my Mamaw Ruby.

AMELIA WITT, GRADE 6

What's in a Name?

My full name is Everett Winston Witt. The meaning of my first name is "brave and joyful." I think the name fits me because my friends and family would tell you that I am brave. For example, I killed a spider in the bathroom one time even though my sister didn't like it. My friends would also say I am very funny, and I usually have a good attitude about everything, so you can say I am full of joy. My first name is part of my heritage because I am named after my papaw Rob on my mother's side. I have good memories of throwing a football around with him and going to his house on Halloween.

My middle name, Winston, is the same as my father, my grandfather, and my great-grandfather on my dad's side. It is a part of my heritage because it's been passed down for so many generations. I think that name shows respect, which is something that I try to be. While I never met my great-grandfather, I have memories of filling up holes with rocks with my Papaw Winky. One time, we went fishing together with my dad and sister, and I caught a snapping turtle and fell in. That was a fun day. He is still alive, and I hope we have a lot more memories together. One memory I have of my dad is going hunting with him during deer season. We saw a deer, and it was a doe, so we didn't know if we were allowed to shoot it at the time, because we didn't know if it was overweight or underweight. Some of my favorite times spent with my dad are when we go hunting.

EVERETT WITT, GRADE 6

What's in a Name?

My name is Sebastian Drake Woodward, and this is the story of the origin of my name. The Greek meaning of the name Sebastian is honorable. I believe I am an honorable person, so my name fits me. My middle name is Drake. Drake is also a name for a male duck. My mom said when I was born I had little yellow hairs that stuck up all over my head, reminding her of a duck. I think that my name is good for my personality because it is original and unique, just like me.

SEBASTIAN WOODWARD, GRADE 6

Unity Reed High School

Carlos Dickson Acuna, EL Teacher
Chris Lem, English Teacher

Los Angeles

The buildings don't light up in daylight, what a shame.
But I was able to take a stroll to the Hollywood Walk of Fame.
Although I am not famous for walking on the red carpet.
I'd try a lot of tasty famous foods in the Grand Central Market.
Even one of the beautiful beaches, Malibu, was great.
I personally would go out to Universal Studios, where I had my date.
I'm also a big fan of historical things.
So let me head down to the Getty Center; I'd love to learn about their kings.

ANGELES AGUILAR, GRADE 9

My Homeland

Afghanistan,
O land of patient mountains,
Where the sky is always blue with prayer.

You are molded from the soil of hardship,
Yet from people
Blooms the flower of resilience. In every street,
A story of perseverance rests.

The wind in your valleys
Whispers the name of martyrs, And the rivers carry both tears and hope.
Your mothers, with hearts bigger than war,
Raise their children with dreams of a brighter future.

O homeland
Though you bear wounds you still breathe, and still your children love the stars.
One day
The sound of books and laughter will be louder than the sound of guns,
And you will once again
Awaken in peace.
Afghanistan, I am your child,
And with every step I take, I carry your name with pride.

TABASUM ANWARI, GRADE 9

Valencia

Variety of places to walk in
August is the hottest month
Long beaches just minutes from the city
El porteno is a restaurant you can eat at
November is the coldest month

Central Market is the 20th largest market in the world
It is a very beautiful city in Barcelona
And known for the birth of paella

CELENA ARGUETA, GRADE 9

Pasaquina

I'm from Pasaquina,
There is a Little Caesar's
You can also find a big grocery shop
We usually have a big event almost every 2 months,
and a famous restaurant named Pollo Campero
that tastes delicious because they put passion into it.
Include Turicentro Obra de Dios; it's really famous
and the nearby El Espino Beach is a popular destination
for surfing and relaxation.

FRANKLIN BARDALES NATIVI, GRADE 9

Guatemala City

I want to visit Guatemala.
Guatemala City is the capital city of Guatemala country.
In Guatemala City you can visit Iximché.
In Guatemala we can visit the zoo.
Valle de Almolonga, the same city of Guatemala.
In Guatemala we can go visit the mall.
In Guatemala we can go visit the lago de atitlan.
In Guatemala we can play some games with kids.
In Guatemala we can go try some food.

LUIS CASTILLO PEREZ, GRADE 9

Paris

I've been to Paris once.
It was fun seeing the Eiffel Tower for the first time.
I walked near the Seine River and enjoyed the view.
Many people were taking pictures at the Louvre Museum.
I did not go inside Notre-Dame Cathedral, but I saw it from outside.
The Arc de Triomphe looked very big and impressive.
For food, I tried croissants and French bread.
If I ever go back to Paris, I would take more pictures.

FAISAL OSMANI, GRADE 10

6 Word Memoir

Making art through music; Band life.

The theme of my six-word memoir is playing in the band. The reason why I chose these six words is that I feel like playing music as one whole group sounds magnificent. Every two or three days a week, depending on what the schedule is, we practice our music during class and work together as usual. Whenever we genuinely

start getting the hang of playing and focusing on different aspects of the given music, it actually is quite joyful to start doing once you actually get the overall vibe of the room and go through flow state. How I overall feel about staying and playing in band for now 5 years ever since 6th grade in middle school is that I feel pretty grateful and delighted. It's because meeting my classmates and getting to know them and hanging out with them genuinely makes me feel like I have another place to be in outside, rather than just hanging out in my room at home all day. Without joining band in the start, I feel like I wouldn't have much of a community base as of now, I wouldn't have much stuff to do as I have now in my current years. In conclusion, my six word memoir tells others that I am really grateful for having to chat with fun and thoughtful people in class, all having an interest in the same topic, which is band.

MELANIE PEREZ CUELLAR, GRADE 10

6 Word Memoir

Always growing, always learning, always curious.

I chose these six words because it shows my personal mindset. I'm always growing each and every day. I learn something new each day, and I'm always curious to do or learn new things because that's simply a part of life. My six-word memoir tells others I'm committing to gaining knowledge skills and my desire to explore new things.

KIMBERLY VASQUEZ GOMEZ, GRADE 10

San Juan de Puerto Rico

I want to visit San Juan de Puerto Rico
because it has a lot of places.
Castillo San Felipe is great for panoramic views.
Another place I want to see is Catedral de San Juan
Because it is the oldest church.
I want to visit La Fortaleza
because it is a big residence of the governor.
Museo de las Americas is a historic cuartel,
but today it is a museum for cultural history.
Finally, Paseo de la Princesa is a waterfront promenade
that leads to the Raices Fountain.
San Juan has many interesting places to see.
For these reasons I want to visit.

EMILY ZELAYA GOMEZ, GRADE 9

Nicholas Ritter, English Teacher

The Sound of Water

The sound of water was relaxing
Just hearing the peaceful sound of an ocean being with family.
With seeing with my eyes the waves coming and leaving with nothing stopping it.
The water makes me want to stay here forever with my family enjoying the beautiful view.
If it could talk to me, I would always understand it in every way possible.

The family together makes me more joyful than ever
It's a very safe place to be with your family members every single day
The seagulls passing by is the best part of the water
Being together as a family by the beach makes you thrilled in such delight.

ANDREW AYALA, GRADE 9

Sailor

My brother is a sailor, strong as the ocean.
He serves our flag, my home, my way.
But when he's home, I find peace,
and baseball brings heart release.
We head outside
Just him and me
And play beneath the trees.
He showed me how to throw a ball
and stand up proud and tall.
Mom cheers us on
And my dad too.
Our family's close and strong.
He teaches me
more than just the game like honor and heart.
In boots or cleats
he leads with pride
And love always is
By my side.

AUSTIN RAFFERTY, GRADE 9

Kathryn Tarr, English Teacher

Six Word Memoir

Classics spinning through my mind.

I picked this quote because I have a passion for older films and the messages that they carry. I really love older films because they have a certain charm that newer films can't seem to replicate or get right. I love the older films for the plot and the characters because the characters are relatable to people who have goals, dreams, and ambitions like anyone else would. And I reference older films a lot and think about the characters' persistence whenever I have to do something challenging or hard.

KAYLA MARSHALL, GRADE 10

Six Word Memoir

To live, To understand, To love

I chose this memoir because to live you have to be alive, you have to have feelings because if you can't feel, then you can't understand. If you can't understand, you won't know how to survive and won't know how to understand love. Finally, if you don't love anything, if you don't feel anything, then you're not really living.

You're just trying to understand something that's unexplainable. Understanding is essential because it makes you curious about life and love.

DEANNA MINOR, GRADE 10

Six Word Memoir

Be brave and embrace your ethnicity!

I picked this quote because I was judged by people for being me. When I was a kid, whenever I talked about my culture or country, people would give me weird stares and looks. This made me hate my culture and for who I am. When I grew older, I realized "Why should I care about what people say or think?", so I embraced my culture and was so happy that I was me again.

ALINA MURTAZA, GRADE 10

Virginia High School

Where I'm From

I am from hairbrush from water bottle and jewelry. I am from the happy women. I am from the moonflower.
The cherry tree whose long gone limbs I remember as if they were my own.

I'm from crazy and crazier from my mother and my father and from anger.

I'm from Richmond and Johnson City and family is everything. I'm from the ball drop. I'm from Johnson City and Bristol and mac and cheese and spaghetti.

APRIL ARNOLD, GRADE 12

Something Interesting

There I was, gazing upon the annual “something interesting about you” question, the one that never failed to spark a brief period of frustration and dissatisfaction before I would reluctantly scribble, “I don’t know.” I was at the beginning of my middle school campaign with the chance to forge a fresh identity for myself. Up until then, I had always been labeled the smart kid. I racked up perfect scores on state tests, and any B on an assignment was worth crying over. However, I never found meaning through my intelligence. Instead of appreciating the gift I had for academics, I viewed this title as more of a burden. As the sixth grade went on, I began to envy my peers who had the cool clothes, attention from girls, and high-ranking social status.

The turning point in my priorities was catalyzed by the new shoes I had picked out for Christmas, Nike Monarch IVs. I viewed them as the perfect mix between being cool enough to help me fit in, yet still resembling something that was me. I recall strutting into school with this newly found confidence. Every step felt effortless as I anticipated many compliments. However, I was instead met with constant insults and laughter. That moment, alongside many other similar events, made me prioritize reputation and social status above all else, while academics were pushed to the side. When the pandemic hit in 2020, I viewed it as the perfect opportunity to rebrand myself. During the rest of middle school, my mindset completely changed. Grades slowly turned into simple numbers that held no weight, and my future was nothing to be worried about yet. I found myself lost, with the lust for meaning and approval controlling my life. This mindset followed me into my freshman and sophomore years of high school. I became content with maintaining acceptable grades rather than what I was capable of, doing what was required to get a B and no more.

It was a seemingly insignificant lunch towards the end of my sophomore year when someone caught my eye. It was a teammate on the track team I had never fully gotten to know. What was significant to me was the shoes he was wearing—Nike Monarch IVs. I instantly noticed how when he wore the shoes, there was no shame or guilt; he was completely unbothered by what others might think. I then realized that the shoes were never the problem, it was my fear of being judged. His name was Justin Mai, and I would formally get to know him during my junior year as teammates on the cross-country team, where we quickly became close friends. During my junior year, I experienced tremendous growth and maturity. Through my time being Justin’s friend, many serious talks took place about my future and what I wanted out of life. He is profoundly serious about academics and served a vital role in my mindset shift during my junior and now senior year. I realized that my lack of effort toward school not only represented my academics poorly, but my character as well. I am now challenging myself with tougher courses. Grades are less of a necessary evil; they serve as a way for me to express my academic ability. Justin is currently studying nursing at the University of Virginia, and his desire to help others has inspired me to try and do the same. I have come to find beauty and fulfillment in helping others and making their day.

When considering “something interesting” about me, I would identify my journey and personal growth. All of my decisions, good and bad, have contributed to shaping me into who I am today. As I begin this next stage of my life, I will do so with confidence, as I have finally renewed the thrill of developing and learning.

ANDREW BATTEL, GRADE 12

Once a Year

Same day, years apart
Her name beside mine in time
That is enough

MARLEY BISHOP, GRADE 12

My Grandfather

Losing my grandfather at the age of six didn't define me, but it ignited something in me to live with a purpose and power through him. His passion has become my passion, and I want to follow in his footsteps. He was taken from me suddenly on his routine morning run on a Sunday in August 2014. Tragically struck by a car, he did not survive his injuries. No last hugs or goodbyes, he was just gone. But the memories I do have with him have now inspired my career path. He was always busy working, and some of the time I got to spend with him was at the radio station. My grandfather was a gospel radio host and broadcaster on a local Christian radio station in our hometown of Bristol, Virginia. To his listeners and followers, he was known as Dave Ray, but to me he was papaw. Visiting him almost every Sunday during his off airtime was one of my fondest memories as well as listening to him on the radio on the car ride home. He would sit me on the chair and show me how the equipment worked and what cassette tapes to put in order. I would get to play in the sound booth to sing and talk through the microphone. I didn't realize then what impact these visits and his love for broadcasting would have on my future career path.

CASEY CODY, GRADE 12

I Am From

I am from diapers
From milk and formula
I am from the rigid and cold
Cozy
I am from the greens
The trees
Whose long limbs I remember
As if they were my own

I am from yelling and arguing
From mother and father
I'm from playing and joking
And from competing.

I'm from manners and consideration
From the golden rule
I'm from Tennessee and The United States

Pizza and pasta.

From my parents meeting long ago.

MICHAEL COLLINS, GRADE 12

Physical Therapy

Being the youngest of three brothers, I spent most of my weekends at sporting events. From running around on the soccer fields to rolling around on wrestling mats in between my brother's sessions, the want to compete has been engrained in me from an early age. I found myself taking up a variety of sports as I grew up, with soccer being my main passion. As with all sports, however, playing year around brings about the risk of injury.

I had my share of nicks and breaks throughout the years, but nothing that rest or a cast could not handle. I would always be suited back up and on the field with my team in short order. That changed by freshman year of high school though. I joined the football team as the kicker and punter. Being a soccer player and wanting to play a fall sport, being part of the team just made sense. The season was going well until I was at practice mid-way through the season and felt a twinge in my hip. I thought my leg might be tired, so I moved to stretching for the rest of practice. The next morning, however, brought no relief from the dull and nagging pain.

A few frustrating practices and a trip to the doctor's office left me with the diagnosis of a strained hip flexor. After working with the athletic trainer for the remainder of the season still left me with pain, I was referred to a physical therapist. Walking into the office for the first time was a little daunting to be honest. I thought I knew some of what a physical therapist did, but all of my expectations made me anxious to learn what I would experience. It only took a couple of sessions for my sessions to shift from nerve-racking to the highlight of my week.

I was fascinated by the techniques and environment. Being able to learn about the human body and ways to strengthen and heal it was eye opening. It also felt comfortable, being surrounded by other athletes that I could share stories with while completing my range of motion exercises. My experience left me with a feeling that physical therapy was a career I could see myself loving. Being able to help people recover and regain function from injury is very powerful. It also quickly became something that I wanted to help others achieve. I found chances in my school schedule to jump start my physical therapy interests, including working with the local community college to take an Anatomy class online and even buying my own TENS therapy unit. I've researched different strategies behind the unit and use it to help with my own muscle healing after sporting events.

In life, just like sports, there will be setbacks and events that are not fair. My hip still aching after a football game is a constant reminder of that fact. Without the injury though, I may have not discovered the passion and interest for physical therapy that I have now. The roadblock, as frustrating as it was, acted as a road sign directing me to a potential future career. I have since learned to not only appreciate the good in life but cherish the challenges too. A willingness to take the bad head on and embrace the potential paths it could lead me down. Heading off to college is a major, and scary, milestone in life. My experience has made me excited to embrace the hurdles and setbacks that it will throw my way and learn how those can shape my future as I work toward a physical therapy career.

OWEN DEAN, GRADE 12

Building Cities

When I was a kid, I built cities. Growing up in a rural area I craved more, a place with more activities, more people, and more life. When I was nine, I downloaded a free trial of The Sims 4 – a game I had seen my favorite YouTuber playing. I instantly fell in love. This simple game fulfilled my hunger for more. It allowed me to create characters – “sims” – and then construct their entire life. I built houses, then neighborhoods, then gyms and cafés and created all the things my small town was lacking. Once my free trial was over, I spent all forty dollars of my Christmas money to buy the game. The Sims became my escape.

When I was playing Sims, I was no longer a little girl confined by Dollar Generals and small-town gossip. I was a master designer pushing my creative limits, giving my sims the life I could not have. I loved tailoring my creations to each individual sim from, art deco tiny homes to medieval castles in the bluffs or million-dollar penthouses in the city. Pushing myself to try new styles and problem solve along the way was the best part. By testing if I liked brick or siding more for each house or playing with platforms and stilts, every building was crafted with intense dedication. Over time, my skills sharpened; it was no longer box houses with gable roofs, but large family-oriented community centers and multi-level homes with character – it was art.

Over the following years, I tried various hobbies and extracurriculars, but none of them spoke to me quite like the small world that was hiding in my mom's old work computer. None of them challenged my creativity and pushed me to find solutions the same way building did. I remember once I told my parents there was nothing more I would like to do for the rest of my life but play *The Sims*. Then I realized I could. Along the way, I learned about architects; they got to build homes, neighborhoods, gyms, and cafes. They built cities in real life. My creations were not subject to a simulation game inside my computer anymore; they could be real. I no longer had to help imaginary characters, instead there were real people. I knew from then on that this is what I wanted to do for the rest of my life – help people, create art, challenge myself, and do what I love. The silly game I bought when I was nine to escape my small town ended up shaping my entire future. While I slowly learned to love my boring little town, I knew there was still so much more world out there, and so many cities to build. Eight years later, 4032 hours and 31 minutes logged on *The Sims*, I am now seventeen. I am still completely in love with architecture and ready to continue building cities.

ELLA DUFF, GRADE 12

Plans After High School

Throughout life, we are often asked what we want to do with it—where we want to attend college, what we want to major in, and what career we aspire to pursue. For me, my dream has always been to play golf in college. I started playing when I was about six, falling in love with the game my grandfather introduced me to. He supported me every step of the way, helping me practice when my parents were busy and spending hours with me at the golf course. Once middle school began, I got serious, practicing daily to improve my swing. In high school, I became the second seed on the varsity team and held it until my senior year. Even with my hard work, I felt I was never good enough for the top spot. By my senior year, I finally became the one seed after years of dedication. Despite this, I sometimes still doubt myself, as matches go both ways between me and the second seed. My commitment never changes: I put in extra work every day, even in the off-season. As my junior and senior years progressed, I began searching for the next chapter—looking at colleges within a five-hour drive from home, with sports teams and manageable campus sizes. My options now include Southwest Community College, University of Pikeville, and Lenior Rhyne University, where I could major in Business Administration and play golf. If golf doesn't work out, I still see myself at one of these schools because they fit what I'm looking for. I also considered the military, taking a test offered at Virginia High School to explore my eligibility. Conversations with Mr. Price at the start of my senior year helped me realize the importance of having multiple options. While I am not certain where I'll go after high school, I am confident I have support to help me figure it out.

NATE HARPER, GRADE 12

Trusting the Process

When I was 12 years old, my old baseball team made us work out together. Slowly, I started to fall in love with weights, the noise of them banging on the racks, the sweat on my brow as I lifted the bar over my head. I loved how intense the environment was to me. Although I didn't like the work, I loved how the people around

me were pushing me to be better than everyone in that place. It gave me a drive to be stronger and faster, and it helped me with my own self-confidence as an insecure, small, skinny kid.

Middle school was really a challenge in my life, introducing insecurity, worry, overthinking, and more. The one activity that helped with all of that was working out. Working out was my go-to happy place; it was the place where I could go and relieve my stress and anxiety. Lifting weights would make me focus on my form and see how hard I can push my limits, but the biggest problem I had was that I wasn't eating enough to gain the weight to be stronger. To be stronger, individuals must eat more than they burn. Unfortunately, I wasn't. Every time I ate, I regurgitated back up. At one point in time, I got used to doing it. Even though it hurt me every time I did it, I learned that if I stop then I won't get stronger. I pushed through the pain to get stronger.

When I started high school, I signed up for the advanced gym course Strength and Conditioning. When I finished with class for the year, I saw that it helped me gain 30 pounds and helped make me stronger too. The people who were in that class were serious about the class, so I had to be too. Once I stopped taking the class, I asked my father if I could work out with him. He agreed, but the problem was that he was going at 5:30 in the morning. Getting up that early every day to lift would be difficult, but I knew I would get weaker if I neglected lifting weights. I needed to work out to improve my physique for baseball season. After time passed, I got used to waking up every day at 5:30 in the morning. People thought I was weird for it, but I couldn't listen to them. I focused on what was important: To be better for my baseball team and gain self-confidence.

Working out is not just about lifting weights or getting faster; it's also about having the discipline and the work ethic to do it every single day. Athletes can't expect to go in the gym occasionally and walk out with muscles. They must have patience to trust the process with it. Another thing I have learned is that consistent discomfort equals consistent growth. The more comfortable one is with a process, the less one will grow. It is in the discomfort, the consistent effort, the daily determination that one can grow, develop, and experience change. That is why I want to inspire the younger generations that working out can help with all significant changes, even in life. These consistent changes, through the practice of a habit, took me a long way, all I had to do was "Trust the Process."

EJ HUCKS, GRADE 12

Delicious Breakfast Sandwiches

Ingredients: Bread, Egg, Milk, Butter, Sausage
bites, Bacon, Cheese, Salt, Pepper

Makes 2

Preparation

Preheat Pans to medium heat

Butter one pan for bread

Spray the other with pam

Steps:

Place bread on butter pans and wait till golden
brown do that each side

Whisk eggs with milk and pour them into a pan

Cook eggs omelet style with cheese and sausage
and salt and pepper in the middle

Split the omelet into 2.

Place half the omelet onto bread with cheese and
bacon.

Enjoy this perfect Breakfast Sandwich

ELIJAH JACKSON, GRADE 12

The Last Dance

I never knew that would be

The last dance.

Our favorite song playing.

The entire room focused on us.
I was clueless to think
You would still be there for me
After she stepped in the way.
I used to pray for you
To hold me that way again,
Only now, I wish I would have
Never met you.
You made me a stronger person,
And I will give you that,
But you also made me a scared person,
Which I could never forgive.
That dance was the last time
Your love felt real
And now all I have
Left of that love, is in memories.
The way you used to
Try to braid my hair,
And teach me the things
Only you loved to do,
Are all things I will never get again.
I wish I had your presence now,
Over the pity presents.
And your love,
Over giving it all to her.

CARLEI KEENEY, GRADE 12

Head in the Clouds

When I was younger, I always had my head in the clouds. Not just any clouds, however, the clouds of far out nebulae and space dust. I loved, and still do, observing the stars. Space is now one of my biggest passions next to art, and this realization came from my astronomy class. I sat there, taking in the sight as Mr. Ashbrook, my astronomy teacher, showed us planets, asteroids, and other celestial objects, with my favorite, the black hole. The math, science, and mystery behind space and all types of celestial objects gave me a glimpse into my future. Even at my job as a cashier at Rural King, I'm wondering about space and what it's hiding from us. I knew this is what I wanted to do. Astronomy was my purpose.

From then on, I've studied celestial objects and their purposes while hoping to pursue a course through NASA's VASTS program. I am a very self-expressive person. Within this expression, my interests, hobbies, and passions tend to stand out. I have several space pins, NASA stickers, and mini planets. Almost everyone who talks to me or interacts with me knows how much I've come to adore the cosmos.

My love for space has shaped not just myself, but my future as well. I plan to work for NASA if possible, with my main goal of becoming an astrophysicist. As much as I love astronomy and all of its elements, my main source of enjoyment is learning and studying the movement and math behind planets, stars, and asteroids. I love calculating the orbital periods and using those numbers to then calculate the density and mass of these celestial objects. I also love researching and understanding the science behind star births and deaths and how eventually some stars end up becoming black holes.

Learning, observing, and sketching the sky and celestial objects has shaped me into a better person as well. Knowing my purpose, I feel whole. I have a meaning and that meaning is to study the stars. Finding out my dream job and passion has made me a happier person and gives me motivation to try my absolute best to reach that goal. Without finding a purpose, I felt sad and like I had no meaning, but now I feel more alive than ever. Astrophysics is my dream and I'm thankful to have the support that I get from my family and my friends. They're all trying their hardest to get me into my dream job and I appreciate every bit of effort they put in to make sure I make it to my goal.

JAIMA MESSER, GRADE 12

Prideful yet Caring

The priorities that people hold without consciousness is what earns my most sympathy. The burden of a life they themselves never yearned, but that of another who lived through them like a parasite instead. This world is a never-ending story, and each life is written short. Months are seconds and years are minutes. Every tick the minute hand of the clock strikes, another life has ended where another began. To waste such a short time fulfilling someone else's goals brings me a burning frustration comparable to that of a mother. "I wish they would just listen, they know I know best." My knowledge may not be great, but it's better than the rest.

BERLIN MORRIS, GRADE 12

My Room

Four years ago, my sister moved away to go to college. Before she left, we each had a separate room. My room was created to be a space that fed my interests. The walls were bright yellow, my bed sheets were covered in flowers, and my walls were decorated with Book Fair posters that I had collected throughout elementary school. I was truly living in the moment and always enjoying the core moments of my childhood. I wanted to stay a little girl forever. I always looked up to my sister, although I never wanted to be an exact copy of her. She seemed so boring to me. I liked having a different opinion from hers. It made me feel accomplished and competitive, even though it sometimes caused conflict.

Now that she had grown up and moved out to start her own journey, I was able to explore more of what she never would let me see in her room. Her room was her own sanctuary, and it seemed like her whole life was inside just four walls. When she was away, I would go look in her big mirror and walk into her closet that once seemed very large to me. Her decorations were still up, and the feeling that I had been looking for, of being free and growing up, lingered throughout the room. Months later, during my freshman year, I decided I wanted a change. I was tired of the boring yellow walls, childish bed sheets, and posters that did not interest me anymore. I was so ready to feel grown and be in charge of my own environment.

The idea of a new room made me feel like I also needed to update the other aspects of my life. I quickly became interested in everything that I did not have before. My whole perspective was flipped around as I grew older. Becoming a high schooler brought a lot of new opportunities for me. For example, I was the only freshman on varsity during my basketball season. The girls around me were always out and about, and their lives never seemed to get boring in my eyes. They modeled the actions of my sister in her college life, and it made me realize that I had a lot of things to look forward to. The anticipation of wanting to be like them is what has created my mindset today.

For me, the room represents more than just a place I sleep; it is a symbol of my own journey towards adulthood. I am always ready to move on to the next thing. I love the feeling of being busy and having specific goals to reach. The result of wanting to grow up so badly has made me understand how much I have actually accomplished. The closet that was once so big is now just a closet, although I wonder how much bigger I can make my next closet in the future. Still, I have the feeling that I am not done yet. The curiosity I once had

about what my sister's room looked like on a deeper level resembles the interest I have in what I can pursue in my future. I enjoy being in charge of my own actions and the feeling of being free. These feelings ignite my interests, which fuel my career goals that I hope to achieve one day.

SARAH PAGE, GRADE 12

Memories of Love

Nostalgia is a powerful thing. A feeling many people, like me, chase after. This sensation is triggered by all five senses. The sight of a video game I played as a child, hearing a song all the kids in my family used to love, the smell of a Christmas tree that reminds me of the magical Christmases I've had, and every time I fall on the grass it triggers a scene of tug of war during field day in elementary school. Above all, taste is what truly brings me back home. Every Holiday and Birthday I've always brought up a question, "Mom, can you please make me a cheesecake?". Caramel, Chocolate, and nuts over an amazing cheesecake that tastes just like the first time she made it brings a sense of nostalgia nothing else can bring. But more important than nostalgia is the feeling of unconditional love that my mom has for me. Our whole life we are loved under the condition that we provide something, and I hate that some people never get to experience the love that my mother has shown to me. If I have learned anything from my mother, it is to not take advantage of that love and to show that same love to others. My mom has been the most influential person in my life, and I encourage you to put yourself aside and be that source of love to someone in your life. Love is a precious thing, don't waste it.

CARTER PRICE, GRADE 12

Justicia de Cadenas: SODRE

"The very first thing I remember from that... remarkable day was lying face down on the ground, holes in my back and chest, looking up to see the soil part and crack to reveal a 25,000-year-old extinct flower. In my time before the Tinged Reverie, I had originally studied plants in university, specifically those from the times before Curanidy walked the earth proper. This species ... the Peregrini Multa, more specifically named, had been born out of entropic incestuous coincidence, being brought to existence's stage after another extinct flower had been pollinated by twenty-eight, nearly genetically identical members of its same genus, the Peregrini. The very concept of something so eclectically unified, something born out of abominable means and origin standing tall and, admittedly, quite stunning in appearance, had always been a concept that my mind had raked over and over, being the only plant I had studied previously where every detail of its existence was engraved in my memories. At first, I was happy... then, confused... shocked, fearful, all the way back to practically ecstatic. This plant, first of all, was never supposed to exist, and the time it had grown upon this earth was long past us. Secondly, it was growing stunningly quickly for any plant, living or dead, for as the moment my eyes raked the ground, I had observed its seedling emerge from the cracked, dry dirt, assert a fully matured stem, sprout leaves, grow buds, then bloom into the exact image I had seen countless times within a small variety of paleobotanic textbooks. Ten petals, all varying in size, with eight being white, two orange that revealed a dipped center, surrounded by a single, thick stamen encircling the most striking part of the entire plant, being the extremely pronounced, yellow pistil, with a grand yellow stigma in the shape of a teardrop. To see it again in such a destructive moment was breathtakingly euphoric, yet that feeling was quickly replaced by watching the colors..."

"...Fluctuate."

"The white petals had begun to pulse in waves of golden yellow, navy blue, and periwinkle, as if a stone was dropped in a pond. The orange had turned a solid yellow, causing me to snap out of my gaze focused on the newly..."

"...would I describe it as new... or old...? i could always... o-oh!"

"Pardon me... the, erm... recently grown blossom. For once, since I had originally been shot to the ground, I looked around at the battlefield before me... and every single thing had halted in their current violences.

Those from the Étendue had completely discarded their efforts to annihilate my allies, as they gazed away in awe towards the sky... which was pulsing almost exactly identically to the flower I had just witnessed rebirth itself. The clouds and smoke that filled the sky had parted into... rings, each bearing the nearly identical colors of golden yellow, navy blue, periwinkle, and white. These rings seemed to extend endlessly into the horizon, as soldiers from each side had collapsed to their knees. It was... rather challenging to tell if they were awestruck, exhausted from severing consciousness from the body, or both. Some of the soldiers cried... others laughed... yelled, ran away, ran towards the center, stabbed others, hugged others, kissed others, or even shot their weaponry into the sky. Any natural, instinctive response a Curan would do in high stress with the belief that the end was near? It was committed that day, battlefield or not... a-and funny thing... that's how I met my wife during the time... she was from the enemy side... a pure blooded Étendue. She wasn't even near where I was fighting... she was just running away, before tripping over me, and before I could even react, she had leapt up and grabbed my shoulders, stared dead in my eyes, and said... s-something. I'm still not sure... I never learned Éntuendian... in fact, she learned Comuna just for me... and she never told me what she even said that day! I-it must've been quite vile... o-or too spicy... personal, or..."

"...Ah, I-I'm sorry... you don't want to know about that, do you? You're here for the Chain's Reverie... right... I forgot you were on a mission... so! Where were we?"

"After... whatever happened with my wife, we had both turned towards what everyone had now begun to stare directly towards, being the largest mountain on Caiman... Berso Larenn. It was where the previous queen, Valiant Cordera had been originally born, and... on that day, had died. Upon the direct peak, a grand, yellow and blue light had filled our eyes... nearly blinding me. My future wife had let go of me, scrambling to the ground, as I had fallen back towards it, my wounds suddenly aching. Yet, as I had begun to further lose my vision, not out of the searing light, but the darkness of exhaustion, the wounds were suddenly... shut up, if you will. There really is no better way to describe it, as for one moment, they were crying like an unsatisfied, spoiled toddler, and the next... it was as if they grew up, and learned to quiet themselves... or, more of... someone taught them to. In fact... they were completely gone. Everything was gone. My exhaustion, my wounds, the holes from the sustained rifle fire, all had miraculously disappeared. I had then regained my vision, with my crumpled form now directly in front of the same flower... the freak of nature that birthed itself anew. With a hesitant hand, I had reached out and picked it from the ground, another suddenly stemming from the torn stem I had just stemmed, the immediate, spontaneous growth from the plucked plucking my vision away from what I had plucked to the newly stemmed. Then, the light atop the mountain had increased in luminosity, yet it no longer disturbed my vision. My eyes adjusted. Instinctively, I took a step, and... I felt weightless. My not-so-soon-to-be wife felt it too. The wind had suddenly ceased, and the nearby, suddenly growing flora had also halted in their swaying. Some soldiers, once again, began to attack each other, wounding with a ceaselessness unseen... not out of fear or hatred... but to test. The wounds immediately healed from nothing. Blood originally absorbed in the ground had blossomed into a new flower I had never observed before, and... I could swear I heard a piano, then an orchestra... a violin, a bass, a chorus..."

"...It was as if... no. Everything HAD halted for Him, and were giving Him a grand procession. Gravity, life, death, shadows, pain, euphoria, guilt, inspiration... they were merely walking a red carpet, stepping aside for something much grander. More important. And in a way, it truly was."

"...The next hour or so before the Summiting are completely lost to me. My entire consciousness had completely blanked, all the way until I had reached the base of the summit, flower in hand, looking upwards at... history itself. Before me was the body of Cordera, lying peacefully within the center of the peak, as the group of Twelve had surrounded it from a distance, kneeling and bowing, both in respect and... the acceptance of a newly appointed leader, both by decision, nature, and the very laws of physics. Directly above the Twelve was a fading, yet blinding light, one that even our newly adjusted eyes struggled to keep a gaze upon for a prolonged

period. Butterflies of red, yellow, green and pink flew around the Twelve, as, from the center of the light, dark blue chains, outlined in a glowing light blue, were sprawling out in entropic chaos. Chains... have always meant binding. Containment. They had been used to enslave, enforce... separate. Contain. Yet, from that day forward... we were chained. The new definition had blossomed. All men, women, child, deity, plant, beast of the earth, and Gautiun were quarks forming protons, electrons, and neutrons. Our formed villages and communities were atoms of iron. Our cities, clusters of particles. Our nations, tightly-wound fibers. Our very existence, laws, languages... they were links. The world was now a chain, made of these strong, unwavering steel, made to clasp onto His wrists. Moments ago, we were breaking these shackles, using the shrapnel to viciously cut and pierce, yet now, they were re-assembled, and happily worn. All people around the Twelve, the queen, and Him had their faces suddenly contort into genuine smiles, our instincts bearing way to the new definition..."

"...For chains meant unity that day."

"Eventually, the light had dimmed to reveal His form, composed of a hovering body, dark, hollow, piercing eyes with a single, white pupil, and rags composed of golden yellow... navy blue, white, and periwinkle. They descended past His legs, as He held a certain gesture for us to memorize, His wrists, body, and... whole corporeal drenched in jewelry, ranging from golden chains, to... things incomprehensible. Suddenly, He broke His formality, looking around the formed, only growing crowd, before looking down at the Twelve. He spoke a language unable to be even understood, as a sudden, sparse, second long headache had struck me, and seemingly everybody else. It was gone as suddenly as it appeared, as He spoke again... with us suddenly being able to understand Him. He spoke many words that day... yet, the only ones I could remember without looking back at the flawlessly recorded entirety of His gospels were the very first He spoke to the world:"

"I PRAY THAT MY ARRIVAL HAS BROUGHT THIS EXISTANCE TO A SOLACE, AT LEAST ONE TEMPORARY, TO HEED MY WORDS. TO UNDERSTAND AND COMMIT THEM INTO YOUR MORAL CODE, TO ALLOW THEM TO BECOME AN UNMISTAKENLY GLORIOUS BLEMISH OF NATURA. I PRAY THAT MY VERY PRESENCE HERE WILL NOT PLUNGE YOUR BEINGS INTO AN INESCAPABLE NODUS TOLLENS, ONE WRACKED OF PAIN AND FEELINGS OF FAILURE. I HAVE COME NOT TO USURP YOUR FAITHS, BUT AFFRIM THEM. I AM ALIVE, AS MUCH AS ALL OF YOU, MERELY WITHIN A SEPARATE DEFINITION. DO NOT TITLE ME WITH ANYTHING GRAND. MERELY TREAT ME AS AN ALLY. SIMPLY CALL ME

SODRE."

"...And it was the presently divided unity from there. Eventually, SODRE had become the very thing that unified all nations. The majority of creeds, beliefs, races, ideals, and truths were all linked in a strong, unyielding chain. The Twelve had faded into the Ten, plus The Advisor, and were appointed with the task of maintaining the granted unification, given gifts of unnatural abilities, paired also with reality-bending trinkets and weaponry only to use "In the most dire of threats." Those nine months of His presence... were unforgettable. I remember everything, despite it being nearly 35,000 years ago. I remember the Lord of Rebellion, the Houlikani, the Bound Renaissance, the Theatre... I recall every bit of it... even after His departure. I remember the standing cities, the newly bloomed species of flora littering reborn fields. I remember the preparations made in His promised return, the clock towers lining each city, standing... waiting."

"I remember Him... and it's a shame that I may never live to see Him again."

"..."

"...I truly thank you for staying and listening, Whylsin... I really do. I know your objective is to dismantle the Ten and deliver justice to their current depravities and crimes, and I know, that in every single way, you are supposed to be my ultimate adversary... but I simply cannot bring myself to kill you. You're doing this for the greater good... for the Ten have faded in their integrity. They have rewritten all things too far."

I appreciate this, Sir Qinui.

"Please... simply call me Ghyui. I know you have everything you need from me, but... please, do visit again."

I will.

"Safe travels..."

"..."

"...Wait."

"...If you were to be erased from history... if the Ten succeeded... know that I will remember you as dearly as I do that flower. Now go... and please, let justice be done."

JONAS PRICE, GRADE 12

Three Kinds of Love

They say you meet three kinds of love in your life. The first teaches you what love feels like. It's innocent, the kind that sweeps you off your feet before you even know what to call it. It's new, messy, and you mistake intensity for depth, because you have never known the difference. The "highs" feel like love but the connection lacks the consistency of a real bond. The second one teaches you what love isn't. It's the hard one, the one that breaks you open. You give too much, stay too long. You convince yourself that pain is proof that you care. It teaches you boundaries the hardest way possible, by showing you what happens when you don't have them. Then, eventually, there's the third. The comfy one. The one that feels like peace instead of adrenaline. The one that doesn't need convincing because for the first time, it feels like both of you are choosing each other at the same time. But that's what most people miss. You don't always meet these loves in order. Because sometimes, your "third" comes first. And you only learn to appreciate it years later. Sometimes your "second" repeats itself until you finally listen. And sometimes, you meet the right person at the wrong time, and they become a lesson instead of a lifetime. If there is one thing that my short life has shown me, it is that love doesn't just arrive to teach you something and disappear. Sometimes, if you're lucky, it stays. It grows with you. That's what she became for me. Not a chapter, not a lesson, but the quiet constant that has held me together. The one who didn't ask for me to be perfect, but honest. The one who didn't love me for who I could be someday, but for who I am. The right kind of love doesn't need fireworks to prove it's real. Sometimes it's a hand held just a little tighter. A voice that steadies your thoughts. A heart that chooses you even on days you can't choose yourself. She is that kind of love. The kind that didn't just enter my life but sustained it.

JACOB ROE, GRADE 12

The Last Letter

I sit stiffly at my desk in the dark. Nothing but a pen and paper in front of me, taunting me. I need to write this letter; I have to get it out. I cannot see him until I write it down. Write down the feelings I've kept to myself. I light the candle stick and shake out the match I used. Picking up the pen, I let out a breath and begin marking the page.

"To my dearest Lain,

"I was never afraid of the dark. I rather enjoyed it, actually. The way everything seemed to shut off all at once. The way my thoughts ran quiet and my brain seemed to shut down. In the darkness I could just exist, I didn't have to be anything except alive and that was enough. At least until I met you. The day I met you everything changed, everything flipped upside down. There wasn't any wrongness to the feelings I had for you, at least not in my eyes. In my eyes, I loved you, and that love was enough. But in your eyes? In your eyes it was wrong. It was so wrong to love me and to be loved by me and I didn't understand it.

"It was something that couldn't be helped though, this love. Our fingers would brush, often, sending electric shocks through every nerve in my body. Our eyes would hold contact for longer than necessary. There was

no reason for any of this; there was no explanation for the feelings we shared. I was never able to explain it to myself, I was confused. I was confused and yet in those moments, those beautiful, stolen moments, nothing felt wrong. In fact, nothing had ever felt as right as they did then.”

“I pause my writing for a moment, setting my pen down. I run my hands over my face and take a deep breath. Memories of Lain and me run through my head. All of the little moments we had together, all the tenderness, the love, the light in those moments make me feel somewhat more alive than I had before. Though they leave as fast as they come, those feelings, because I am overcome with sadness again as I continue to write.

“Loving you was a sort of darkness itself, but I couldn’t stop myself from falling. I’d continue to fall, hurdle, into this darkness that wasn’t so dark with you. You attempted to pull away from me, so much, and I was prepared to let you go. I was prepared to sacrifice my feelings for you because I felt that strongly about you. ‘It’s wrong,’ you’d say. ‘Man cannot love man; it is a sin. It’s a sin and we will be damned.’ But if what I feel is wrong, why does it feel right? Why does my heart beat for one thing if that thing isn’t something it should beat for. Not every ‘wrong thing’ is right, but is love not right? Is loving someone, being so completely consumed by someone, wrong?

“Love is beautiful and pure. It is painful, yet not. Love is the most magical thing that can happen to a human. Our souls are intertwined, dancing among the stars and it is lovely. Even now, when I am alone and surrounded by the not-so friendly darkness. Even when you refuse to entertain the idea of loving me back, they dance. They are twirling to a soft tune only heard within space. Can people not see them, two beautiful, pure souls dancing in love? Can they not sense the air changing, moving with the soft melody that plays when they do so?

“Why do they try to make us feel ashamed of it, of loving? How is our love any different from theirs, and why do you feel the need to leave me broken and alone in this darkness because of their whispered lies of burning and damnation? We will not be burned for our love, and even if that were the case, even if we were to be damned for it, I’d gladly suffer. If it meant I got to experience life with you, life being so in love, I’d suffer for eternity. Just for that small piece of magic.”

I pause again, this time pondering what the next stroke of pen on paper will have me write. Writing this letter should be simple. It is not. The feelings that I’ve kept bottled up are confusing, yet not. It’s strange, knowing what I have to write but at the same time, not knowing what to write at all.

How do I write everything I’ve ever felt for Lain in one simple letter, my feelings for him could write novels, hundreds of them? The pain that we went through, the criticism we faced, those alone would take a while to discuss. Because this world is harsh to people like me and Lain, it does not seem to like us much. They do not like our love and we have been tortured for it.

“Darkness scares me now. Probably because every time I am alone in the darkness with my thoughts my heart breaks a little. The fragments of the broken pieces cut deep, scarring my insides. Your eyes haunt me when the lights are off, the fear bleeding through your gaze, the regret, the finality in your decisions. You left me alone on this Earth, and I know you only did it because you sought a life where you could be happy and free. But I cannot forgive you, at least not right now. I cannot forgive you because I am so in love with you, even still. I love you wholly.

“I want you to know that I have not loved since. Your ash brown eyes, curly dark hair, and soft lilting voice are all I think of, and I find myself searching for reminders of you in everyone. I cannot forgive you yet, as I have said. But maybe when I am able to finally see you in the afterlife, things will change.

“I am afraid of death, as I am sure you were. I am afraid and yet I have come to terms with what I will do. The whispers are starting to become too much. My own parents hate me, I once thought that things would get better, but it has been two years and things have only gotten worse. I am sad Lain; I am so very sad about not

being able to see you anymore. I understand though why this was your escape, because it seems this will be my escape too. It's the only escape for me; it's the only way out I see.

"Ironical how my favorite stories are tragedies and my life is a catastrophe. It is a conundrum of pain. I have faith that my sadness will cease to exist when our souls meet again. Wait for me, please? I fear that if I go alone, I will get lost. You always help me find my way.

With all my love,

Arien."

I set the pen down and fold the letter. I take my time with it, stalling, because I am overcome with nervousness. I stick the corner of the folded letter in the fire of my candle and watch as it burns into nothingness, hopefully finding its way to the one it's intended for. Then I make my way to the bridge I will cross to meet my Darling Lain, where I hope he will be waiting.

AKEELAH ROLLER, GRADE 12

My Future

For as long as I can remember, I have had vivid flashbacks of growing up in my dad's office. Currently, my father is an insurance agent for SESCO Group, a subsidiary of Erie Insurance Group. Whether I was sitting in dad's office or being excited about him taking me on an adventure to inspect a house, I was always willing and ready to go. I did not really understand the concept of what insurance was, but I always saw myself following in his footsteps. From dressing up in suits to practicing lines in my head on how I would answer the phones and help customers, I always knew this was the job for me. Not only did these scenarios inspire me, but the side of helping people became the reason for my passion of becoming a businessman. I learned there was a whole lot more from my business career. I love seeing and hearing my dad help his customers out of difficult situations, such as conversations with people who have totaled their car or other instances that would usually cost them thousands of dollars. Hearing his clients talk about how devastating the losses were to them showed me there is much more than just making money in this business. His way of caring and making the whole situation better with just a few words made me admire him and realize I could find ways to help people better their lives.

This is why I'd love to attend college to expand my knowledge about the world of business. I have already started by taking business-related classes like economics and sports marketing. Not only have I just taken classes, but I've learned how to build a business vocabulary which would allow me to have effective conversations with a variety of clients. I love talking to other business owners about how they've started their business and the struggles they went through to get where they are today. In other words, I am great at starting conversations and asking the appropriate questions. From these questions I've asked, I learned that the most success comes from being focused and efficient in the business field. I am a lifelong learner. Every day, if I'm not at work or at school, I'm probably practicing for a sport I'm playing that season. I take being on a team very seriously as I always try to be the best role model and leader for my team. I love encouraging my teammates to achieve greatness. That same determination carries over to other parts of my life.

Out of my three siblings, I am the youngest and only one who plans on obtaining a college degree. My parents have always wanted all of their children to graduate from college, which I have every intention of doing. Achieving a college degree is about proving to myself that I can do this. I want to build onto the business my dad has started and make it even greater. Hopefully in many years to come I will be sitting at his desk in an office many, many floors above ground, growing his business with new technology, ideas, and purposes.

GAMBLE STEVENS, GRADE 12

Ukiyo

It was around 6:00 pm, the sun was setting making the sky like watercolor scenery. Ayumi Umi walked home from her school after a long study session; all she could think of was just laying on her bed and taking a long nap. While adjusting her school bag, she saw someone very familiar, someone she knew but never met. When she got closer her vision was very clear it was Sora Sato. Sora was one of Ayumi classmates they know each other that well, but they did often work together on projects. When they first met each other, Sato was a bit shy but also a bit of an introvert, Ayumi was kind and patient to understand Sora that it changed him to be a bit social with other people.

"Hey Sato" said Ayumi while waving and running towards him Sato looking behind.

"Oh hey Umi" looking a bit surprised.

"You take this station?"

"Yeah sometime" Sato replies. "Only when I don't feel like taking my bike especially after a long day of school".

"Ugh, tell me about it," said Umi in a fatigued state.

"I had to stay after school just to study. Exams had got me feeling weary."

There was a moment of silence as waves crashes on shores and seagull soaring through the sky until Sato asked, "Do you have any plans for the weekend?"

"Not really" Umi replied "Just stay home, probably watch some cute dogs on YouTube"

"Well, if you like? I'm going to the Enoshima Aquarium. There is going to be dolphin show." When Ayumi heard that, her eyes lit up.

Sato looking a bit surprised from Umi's reaction, "Uh, yeah and there also going be a light show too."

"A LIGHT SHOW?! I cannot wait. I'll definitely be there."

"Oh, great. What time are we leaving?" Umi asked.

"How about 9:00? Sound good?"

"Sounds great. I can't wait." Soon after their conversation ended, the train arrived. They hop on the train and go home.

The next morning, Sato stroll along the side as he approached Umi's house. He knocked on the door and waited for a few minutes. The door finally opened.

"Hey Sato" said Umi with a cheerful voice.

"Hey Umi, you look great."

Sato replied, "Thank you, I thought I just dress up for the vibe since we are going to the aquarium." Umi was wearing white dress tank top along with blue cardigan. She was wearing jeans and converse, and to top it all off, she had starfish hairclips to match her style.

"So, shall we get going? I don't want to miss our train," said Umi.

Sato felt like he was hypnotized by Umi appearance. To him she looked like a walking jellyfish that fell from heaven. They both went to station just as train arrived. The ride only took about seven minutes from Katase to Enoshima. They finally arrived at their destination. After their three-minute walk from the station they soon approached the aquarium.

The aquarium was a two-story building almost like an office building.

"Wow, this seem like an interesting building" Umi in a joyful tone "Yeah, almost like an office building my dad use to work at," said Sato.

"Well I'm pretty sure the inside looks even better."

"You're probably right."

"Now let get going. Can't wait to see dolphins and other marine life that awaits."

They approached at ticket stand where they were introduced to a woman who sold tickets. "Hey, two tickets please."

"That would be 1,800 yens," replied the cashier. Sato opened his wallet and handed the money to the young lady.

As Sato and Umi both went inside they were completely amazed by what they saw. The room was a large tank filled with all kinds of different fish from sardines, sharks to rays and shirasu fish.

"Sato, look at all of the fishes," Umi voice filled with wonder.

"This is just like straight out of a film," Sato was amazed by the marine life floating above.

"What time is the dolphin show?" Ayumi asks.

"Let me see," Sato pulled out a pamphlet from his pocket. "It says here that the show starts at 11:00, I'll set an alarm, so we won't forget. In the meantime, let's explore the rest of the area."

"Sounds wonderful," said Ayumi.

As they explore deeper into the deep-sea exhibit, Sora and Ayumi saw many amazing things that had been in store. From touching sea turtles to seeing sea otters playing roughly, they were both having fun. Ayumi took many pictures of sea creatures; Sora couldn't take his eyes off her. He felt this feeling like something was burning in his heart.

"Hey, is everything okay?" Umi asked. Sato returned to consciousness.

Sato returned to consciousness. "Sorry, I was lost at thought," Sato replies.

Ayumi looks around and caught something with her eyes, "Hey, look a jellyfish exhibit we should go in there." The room was dark filled with different kinds of jellyfish. Ayumi and Sora were amazed to watch the lighting creatures floating around without caring in the world. Ayumi kept taking pictures nonstop.

"Hey Sato, you wouldn't mind taking my picture, would you?" Umi asks.

"Sure" Sora replies.

Sora pointed the camera at Ayumi as she throws a peace sign. The lighting was perfect, making the photo look cuter than ever.

"Do you like it?" Sato asked in a nervous tone. Ayumi looked at the photo for a moment.

"I'll love it" Umi replies.

Ayumi and Sora decided to sit down and watch the jellyfishes dancing around the tank. "You know, jellyfish are the most fascinating creatures on this planet," Umi said.

"Oh really?" Sato replies.

"Don't get me wrong. I love all the sea creatures here, but the jellyfishes are my favorite."

"Why is that?" Sato asks.

"Because each jellyfish has their own light." Umi replies. "Each of them is either small, big, purple, or pink. No matter how different they are, they're still beautiful like us humans."

"I like to think humans are like jellyfish; we all have our own light to shine and when we come together, we're brighter than ever. Sorry if that sounds weird."

"No, not at all" Sato said, "I think we're all unique creatures on this planet."

"That is what makes the ocean beautiful because it embraces its uniqueness." Ayumi and Sora were now looking at each other in full eye contact; it was just them and jellyfish floating around in the tank. Suddenly, the peaceful moments were Interrupted by a loud alarm, so loud it startles them. Sato pulled out his phone to check time.

"It's 11:00, we should go before we miss the show," said Sato.

"Oh right, I almost forgot about that." They both headed to stadium as fast as they could hoping to make it on time. They both stopped to catch their breath as they entered the stadium to take their seat.

The show was the best thing they have ever seen. They dolphins and humans shook hands, taught them tricks and awarded them with treats. The light was perfect, making a scenery as dolphins jump through hoops.

At the end of the show, everyone applauded, as scuba drivers bowed.

"That was one best shows I have ever seen," said Umi.

"I'll never thought to see a dolphin shake hands" Sato replies.

"Are you hungry?" asked Sato,

"Yes, I'm starving" Umi replied. Both went to a café; they ordered sandwiches and coke.

"Wow, this looks so good" said Umi.

"I heard they make the best sandwiches in this region."

"You know Sato, this has been really fun. Thank you so much for bringing me here."

"You're welcome Umi. If you like, we could do more fun things like this, if you ever free."

"I would love to." Sato felt a little flutter in his heart. After finishing their meal, Sato and Umi were pretty stuffed.

"Oh, before we leave, there is one thing I would like to do," said Umi. Umi points toward the wave. Sato then expresses a smile. They both walk down toward the beach; you can hear waves rushing on shore and seagulls soaring through the air scouting their meal.

Before entering the water, Umi took off her socks and shoes and ran towards the waves, Sato watching her, having a good time in the water.

"Are you coming in?" Umi asks.

"Yeah, give me a second." Sato took off his socks and shoes. He felt the cold-water rush through his feet. "Man, that is cold"

"Of course, it is going to be cold." Umi said, giggling. She then splashes water at the boy, and he splashes back at Umi. They both spend rest of their evening by the waves, collecting seashells and watching birds go by. At the end of the day, both of them took photos of themselves having fun, marking it as the perfect weekend for two.

JOSEPH TOY, GRADE 12

Jazz

Music has always been a significant part of my life, evolving alongside my tastes and experiences. Growing up, I found myself increasingly captivated by the art of music, which seemed to add a dynamic layer to the music I loved. Each decade brought new influences; at the age of ten, I was drawn to the catchy melodies of Justin Bieber, while by thirteen, my tastes had shifted towards the vibrant energy of Cyndi Lauper, particularly her iconic anthem "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun," which I danced to with unabashed joy.

As I entered my mid-teens, my musical journey took an intriguing turn, drawing me into the captivating sounds of the fifties. I spent countless hours in record stores, searching for hidden treasures and discovering artists like Chet Baker, whose music resonated deeply with me. By fifteen, I had fallen headfirst into the world of jazz, with legends such as Miles Davis, Louis Armstrong, and Ella Fitzgerald shaping the soundtrack of my life. Their innovative melodies and expressive improvisations enriched my daily experiences and became integral to my identity. However, as I progressed through my junior year, a significant shift occurred, leading me to unexpectedly halt my daily rituals of engaging with jazz. This change marked a pivotal moment in my musical journey, prompting me to reflect on my evolving relationship with the genre.

Upon considering the "Cultural Event" prompt, I decided to revisit my old jazz playlists due to jazz's significance in American culture. Jazz originated in the early 20th century in New Orleans, merging African rhythms, blues, and European musical traditions. It underwent an evolution during key periods, such as the Harlem Renaissance and the emergence of big bands in the 1930s. Influential figures like Louis Armstrong,

Duke Ellington, and Charlie Parker played crucial roles in shaping jazz as a distinctive genre. Its foundation in African American communities, characterized by improvisation and rhythmic complexity, underscores jazz's identity as uniquely American, reflecting the cultural diversity and innovation present in the U.S. during times of social and racial change.

Jazz music is a genre that captivates many due to its unique characteristics, particularly its reliance on improvisation, which sets it apart from other musical forms. This improvisational element is fundamental to jazz; musicians often create melodies, harmonies, and rhythms spontaneously while adhering to a song's structure. Unlike most genres, where performers focus on executing a predetermined composition, jazz musicians harness their creativity and technical skills to innovate in real-time, frequently taking turns or responding to one another's musical cues. This freedom inherent in improvisation fosters a profound emotional expression and invites experimentation with diverse musical ideas, ranging from simple thematic variations to sophisticated and intricate solos. The roots of improvisation in jazz can be traced back to African musical traditions, which prominently feature call-and-response techniques and emphasize individual expression, thus solidifying improvisation as a cornerstone of the genre's identity. As a result of this improvisational nature, jazz musicians continuously explore and transcend musical boundaries, delivering fresh interpretations with each performance, and ensuring that no two sessions are alike. This ongoing dialogue among musicians not only enhances the listeners' experience but also reinforces the rich tapestry of jazz as a living, evolving art form.

As I revisited my old jazz playlists, I was struck by the remarkable diversity of genres that have emerged within this beloved music form, each contributing to its rich and evolving history. Jazz began with Dixieland, or traditional jazz, which took root in early 1900s New Orleans, characterized by lively collective improvisation and a vibrant mix of brass instruments and banjos, creating an infectious energy that defined the era. As the 1930s and 1940s rolled in, swing music captivated audiences with its big bands and syncopated rhythms, perfect for dancing, led by legendary figures like Duke Ellington and Count Basie, who brought a celebratory atmosphere to the forefront of jazz. The 1940s also ushered in bebop, distinguished by its complex, fast-paced rhythms and a focus on virtuosity, with pioneering artists such as Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie pushing the boundaries of musical expression. In contrast, the late 1940s and 1950s saw the emergence of cool jazz, a smoother, more harmonically sophisticated sound championed by luminaries like Miles Davis and Chet Baker, exuding an elegant yet relaxed vibe. This was followed by hard bop in the 1950s, which marked a return to emotional, soulful playing, heavily influenced by blues and gospel, with artists such as Art Blakey and Horace Silver infusing their music with heartfelt intensity. The genre's evolution continued with modal jazz, popularized by innovators like Davis and John Coltrane, who explored musical modes instead of conventional chord progressions, allowing for greater improvisational freedom. The 1960s heralded the arrival of free jazz, a radical departure that embraced avant-garde and experimental improvisation, with visionaries like Ornette Coleman and Coltrane leading this bold movement, challenging traditional structures and redefining the essence of jazz. Finally, fusion emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s, blending jazz with rock, funk, and other genres, resulting in a dynamic, electric sound exemplified by Miles Davis's groundbreaking album "[B*tches] Brew" and the innovative work of Herbie Hancock. Each of these genres not only showcases the artistic evolution of jazz but also mirrors the cultural, social, and musical transformations of their respective times, reflecting the genre's capacity for innovation and expression.

Jazz has the incredible ability to infuse you with energy in a way that few other genres can. The spontaneous nature of improvisation means that each song feels alive as if it's being created in the moment. The rhythms, unpredictable changes, and complex harmonies have a contagious energy that makes you want to move, whether you're tapping your foot, nodding your head, or even dancing. Every time you listen to jazz, it feels like you're hearing it for the first time because no two performances are ever identical. Each interpretation brings something new—whether it's a wild, exhilarating trumpet solo, a delicate piano riff, or an intense drum

breakdown—that keeps you on the edge of your seat, eager to see where the music will take you next. Jazz thrives on creativity and surprise, which is what makes it so exciting. Unlike genres where the song follows a predictable path, jazz is constantly evolving, making it feel fresh and new with every listen. The way musicians feed off each other’s energy in real time makes the experience feel immersive and vibrant. It’s not just a genre; it’s a conversation between instruments, a celebration of spontaneity, and an expression of emotion that can reach deep into your soul. For all these reasons, jazz could very well be the best genre of music around. It offers an emotional depth, intellectual complexity, and dynamic vitality that few other styles can match. It has the power to make you feel alive, constantly moving, and always craving more.

MILLER WEAVER, GRADE 12

Brad Hutchinson, Creative Writing I and II

Black Cat

In a small, enchanted cabin,
Buried deep in the forest,
resides a lonely witch.

Not an evil witch,
A witch who casts pleasant spells,
Not vile.
She offers protection
To the unfortunate.

Halloween,
always a busy day.
Every year,
Plenty of black cats
have been rescued.

Lying outside her cabin,
Was a black cat.
Bloodied and battered.
Bruised and broken.

Back in the cabin,
The witch sits in a dark room,
being only lit
by a few candles
surrounding her.

She picks out rosemary,
Black salt, clove,
Garlic, and basil.
The air around her shifts

as she stares
into the bubbling pot.

The candles flicker.
The cat squirms to life,
Now safe and healthy
On Halloween night.

ALYSSA HARLESS, GRADE 10

Why Am I Feared?

What frightens you about me?
Is it the home I built in the corners of yours?
My webbings hang in the intricate designs I've done on my own.
My place of capture for flies who foolishly step inside,
You find them pesky, and I exterminate them.
How do I disturb you?
Is it the thousands of limbs I was born with?
While you humans are accustomed to four, I have more.
You mammals believe you can succeed with only walking on two,
I walk on many, and accomplish so much before my short life
comes to an end.
Why do I cause you to scream?
Is it my blackened, bulging eyes?
Millions were implanted into my skin, so I see every nook and cranny.
Void of color
And rid of emotion, yet we still feel.
How do I disgust you?
Is it the ability to produce my thousands of offspring?
My ravenous babies all come from one silken sack.
They all thirst to live, yet many die early.
They were born hungry,
Cold,
Crying.
What about me terrifies you?
Is it my vast lineage which inflects poison and death?
Are bright skins warning you of danger?
Yet you are hypnotized, attracted to us.
Others know better to retreat, but you are the fools, not I,
Not we.
Not then does our venomous juices course through us
And save us when we are attacked.
What about me petrifies you?
Is it my choice to stay within the dark?
Not truthfully mine, but yours
To keep us hidden from view in places with much depth.

You think we creep in the shadows to strike.
No, we cower with fear in our hearts
And pray we hid well from you.
Are we truly the creatures you fear the most?
We are?
Okay.

KAMILLA MARTTIN, GRADE 12

Depths

Lumbering
Shambling
Like some hulking sea-beast
Reeking
Rotting
With the stench of maritime decay
Gurgling
Bubbling
From a long-since-snapped oxygen line
Forth stalks a manmade horror
Of water and grime

Rusted
Abandoned
Sunken in the murky sea
Tarnished
Dented
A helmeted head dips
Frosted
Chipped
An unseeing window
Hiding a rotten face
In a watery grave

Barnacles
Corals
Adornments to death
Seaweed
Sludge
Muck from the depths
Rubber
Metal
From the surface above
Unable to preserve or save
The diver within

Folly
Bravery
Tools of demise
Navigation
Exploration
Cost it its life
Waves
Currents
Carry its fate
Sunken and rotten and drowned
Deep below
Where murk and sea-snow
And creatures of the deep
Dissolve all the things
Human or not
In the depths
Where sun dies
Everything
Rots

MOIRA MCKENZIE, GRADE 12

We are Susceptible

Excerpt

"The sun beat down over the amusement park oppressing everyone. Crying, screaming kids were running around, the parents not having a care in the world and doing much the same as their kids. The smells were overwhelming. Popcorn, candies, sweat, a vague floral scent, and the far-off scent of rain all mixed in the air. All of this plus a headache would have made anyone irritated, but no one in Everett Hayloft's family seemed to understand this. And all the "oh drink water""oh do you want to take something?" "Oh, just ignore it" Weren't helping.

The ride operator that was running the carousel also wasn't doing much good for his headache. The employee had such a sweet voice that she somehow was putting Everett to sleep at the curb he was sitting on waiting for the rest of his family to get off the ride."

BROOKE SONNER, GRADE 10

Fear

Fear lurks in my bones.
A feeling that never sleeps.
Even when I rest,
The fear still finds a way.

The clown stalks my thoughts.
It stares with golden eyes and croaked teeth.
It watches me sleep, eat, and breathe.
I can feel it within my walls.
The sounds of its chainsaw keep me awake.

I'll forever be Paranoid when it is awake.
The paranoia always gets to me.
I fall silent and still when I think of it.
Even if I know it's not real.
I remind myself of that every day.
When I encounter it at night
I feel my bones go cold and my blood warms.
I shut my eyes, and I tell it to go away.
Soon I'll sleep and wake up safely.
The clown was always imaginary anyway.

EMBER WOHLFORD, GRADE 10

Brad Hutchinson, Dual Enrollment 11

The Need for a Want

I walked into the store, held up by columns and arches within the gigantic mall. The bright translucent name of IT'SUGAR displayed on the store's façade. I stood there, a young Black male around 10 years old—eyes enlarged, skinny, five foot one inch—scanning the shelves full of toys and candy. I looked around the beautiful store, splattered with bright colors of bubblegum pink and sky blue, the sweet aroma filling my nostrils, my eyes enlarging even further as I read the millions of candy brands, many names I had never even heard of before.

I watched as my mom walked into the store after me, her eyes following the same path mine had just seconds ago.

"Whoa, Mom, can I have this?" says the much younger version of me as he grabs a large pack of Skittles.

Like she was possessed, my mother grabs the sweet bag of candy out of my hands, flipping it around in circles, searching the large pack of Skittles as if there were text hidden within the swirl of many colors drowning the pack. After a second or two of examining the colorful exterior of the pack of candy, she stopped, taking another quick second to read something. She then laid it down right in the position it was before I had picked it up. I heard her sweet but commanding voice as she turned toward me again.

"What did I tell you about grabbing stuff in the store?" she said in a sweet whisper.

"But Mom..."

"No, Son, it's too expensive anyway."

She holds a puzzling look on her face, staring at me, then back at the candy. I then realized why she was examining the huge pack of colorful candy. I grabbed the large candy pack, the entire thing engulfing my hand, and flipped it around, mimicking the same movements she made earlier. There read the small dull letters, almost faded out.

"But Mom, it's only fifteen dollars," I said in a disappointed tone.

"Do you know how much fifteen dollars is, Jarae?" she asked me, as if she wanted to know the code to a door with a million dollars behind it.

"Barely anything, Mom. I need it!" I exclaimed to my mother, genuinely believing what I said at that moment.

At the time, I really didn't know how much fifteen dollars was. Like many children my age, it was paper to me—something that parents had an infinite amount of. At that time, I thought I needed that bag of candy. I believed it would be the end of the world if I didn't possess that pack of candy by the end of the night. If I wasn't lying there, watching my favorite cartoon, pumped full of sugar, then I wouldn't be happy.

At that time, I only understood money as a way to satisfy what I wanted. What I didn't understand was what I truly needed. I would soon learn this lesson again, with higher stakes, as I got into athletics.

That day marked the start of my football career—my first season playing and the one that inspired me to continue and do so much more. Before I could start that season, though, I needed equipment.

"Hey Mom, can we go get cleats and gloves?" I asked her, pleading.

"Yeah, alright. Don't get up in this store begging me for everything," she said, laying down the order.

I complied, responding with, "Yes, ma'am."

Thirty minutes later, I stood in the store, emotions reflecting the same intensity I had felt standing inside the colorful candy store years earlier. There were shoes and clothes draped all over the walls—pink shoes, blue shoes, hundreds of colors and assortments. I followed my mom through the store until we ended up in the back corner examining a rack of shoes. A huge sign hovered above it reading: "FOOTBALL CLEATS HERE." The first pair I laid my eyes upon was akin to first love. I wanted them. I needed them. I didn't know the difference back then, but it was all I wanted.

"Mom, I want them. Please let me get them, please!" I said, pleading.

"Which ones? Let me see them," my mother said.

I pointed to a pair of black and gold cleats. I loved the color black, thinking it went with everything. Though that day I recognized that it went with gold perfectly.

My mother picked up the cleats I had immediately fallen in love with. "See, Mom, they are perfect, right? Please?"

I watched my mom examining the pair of cleats. A sigh rolled out of her mouth. Her puzzling look was similar to the one she has when I plead for fast food or the look she wore when she realized the price of the bag of candy I wanted so much years ago.

"Son, these are extremely expensive," my mother said.

I looked at her with the same defeated puppy-dog eyes I must have had when she refused the candy years ago.

"Okay, Boy, I'll get them. Just promise me you will take care of them and enjoy them. These are extremely expensive, Jarae, so wear them out for a long time. When you wear them, you better think of me, okay?" she said, the confusing expression she always had in situations such as these returning as she put on a smile.

"Yes! Yes, I promise!" I exclaimed happily.

Later that day, I put the new cleats on for practice. My feet melted into them as if they were made for me. I ran in them, and it felt like running in the air. I was immediately overwhelmed with gratitude that my mom had bought them. Every time I wore them, I thought about their expense and the sacrifice my mom made so I could wear the pair I loved. Thinking about it, I realized the cleats were a necessity. I needed them, and my mom made sure I had a pair I loved, expensive or not. I thought back to the candy store—the puzzling look and expression across her face that day. I finally understood what it was, because I wear it now as well.

"Fifteen dollars? No way, that is so expensive," I blurted out loud, wearing the same face my mom wore that confused me years earlier.

A face filled with sacrifice.

JARAE BRYANT, GRADE II

In-Between

My seventh out of the sixteen Christmas eves I have had is when the in-between began. Well, actually it was when I first met the in-between. That night, when the in-between came from the place that he has been in ever since I turned three months young. I admired him when he walked through that door. He was tall, short cropped brown hair, tattoos up and down his arms, and dark blue eyes. He looked just how he did in the

photos. He made his first promise that night, that he would never go back there again. Now I'm not sure he even remembers. We built a fort together, one we would sleep in the whole night, I finally thought "I'm normal now." And that morning was the first Christmas morning I had him by my side.

My mom decided she'd let me go over every weekend, and at least a week or two during the summer. She didn't have to; she had full custody of me after the in-between threatened to try and take me away from her, not that he ever could with the record he had. My mom didn't want to take the chance. He came up with these outlandish lies. He would threaten my momma with. Yet, she still let me go over. She wanted me to grow up at least having the choice to know and get to know him, because she didn't grow up knowing hers.

It was then me and the in-betweens first summer together, the in-between had started making his famous promises more. That second Friday of June that I spent on the steaming hot brittle stone porch, and at my bedroom window was the first of plenty. My momma handed me her phone with a sour look on her face. I was confused at first, but then the in-between started to make his voice known. He talked about me eating dinner and spending the weekend with him at my grandparents' house, since he hadn't found his own place yet. He promised he'd be there by 4:00 at the latest. I kept my end of the promise. I was ready by 3:50. My momma had packed my school bag full, not with the usual pencils and notebooks, but with clothes and hair products I would need for the upcoming days. She sat the bulky backpack on my shoulders, and it weighed my shoulders down making them look uneven and awkward. It was at least five minutes past four by the time I decided to wait outside, I walked out grinning ear to ear thinking he should be here soon. My face immediately felt the sweltering sunny rays of the summer hit my face. I sat on the first step of our stone porch; I hissed at the heat of the stone on my bare legs. Momma kept our main door open but left the screen door open so that she could keep an eye on me. I sat there, still smiling until I felt like my jaw would lock in place, still waiting for him to come and pick me up.

Ten minutes turned into twenty and twenty minutes turned into thirty. I had gotten used to the grit and burn on my legs. My grin turned lopsided, my head turned in complete disorder, eyes squinted, eyebrows pushed together in concern, looking down on any road, my eyes could see. Momma would eventually convince me to come inside and eat the dinner she had made. She said I could call him after I satisfied my appetite.

She handed me her phone once more. She made sure I saw the in-between's name on the screen. She made sure I felt the buzzing all through my fingertips. I realize now she wanted me to know she was trying. We tried once more and nothing. I still waited outside my bedroom window, sitting on my Tinkerbell bed. He never showed up. My mom decided she would start dropping me off after this.

I'd reached my tenth year around this time. The in-between had three more daughters. We kept on with our self-scheduled weekends he'd picked when he wanted people to see me with him. Sometimes, the weekends pass by without a thought; sometimes, they would be a memory I'd savor or hate. Sometimes I'd dread the ride to his house. Secretly I'd look back at my mom's and wish I'd never stepped out. I'd wonder what I'd miss this weekend with them. My heart would sink in this confusing way; I loved the in-between, I always defended him when someone said he would lie. I was loyal to him in the way his dog Duchess was loyal to him. I would always still go back to his house because I feared losing him again. I felt like if I weren't there to calm him down and take care of him, who else would? So, I stayed quiet and let my heart sink further.

The weekend would be the same: listen to my dad and girlfriend fight around the house, drag my siblings to their shared room, and hear my name get thrown around here and there like they were passing a ball back and forth. I'd then spent my night on my designated spot on the living room armchair trying to find a comfortable position to sleep in while the wooden frame dinged through the old withering plush of the chair. I hated that chair. I'd always wake up with my body stiff. I didn't sit on it during the day. I have one memory I cherish in that exact chair I hate.

I was lying in the chair I hate, watching something I couldn't even focus on because of the frame digging in my side. When I heard a thump, my youngest sister Camelia was crying. She was around two at the time.

I sat up immediately. I waited a minute, squinting down the long hallway of the trailer from my chair to the in-between's room. Their door was wide open, waiting for someone to get her, to comfort her. When I realized no one would get up, I decided to. I slowly got up from the chair, scared something would grab my feet from the darkness under the armchair. My sister was still wailing in the other room. I pushed through the dark of the hallway tripping over a forgotten toy on the way. When I finally made it to their room, she was on her knees now. My two other sisters were still asleep. Her blue eyes met mine, as she raised her arms right when she spotted me, I picked up Camelia, my arms shaking, and carried her slowly to my chair. I squeezed us into the chair, adding an extra blanket to make it more comfortable. Her crying slowly stopped as I rubbed her back, asking if she was ok. I turned on her favorite movie, and we sat together. All I heard was her silent skips in her breath from the result of her crying. That's when I realized the reason I keep coming back, it was for them. If I didn't come back, who would be here like this for them?

The ride back home would be the same: horrid. My shoulders would still be tense from the yelling. I'm in the passenger seat, looking wearily at my dad wondering if I would ever grow up to end up with someone like him. Or even grow up to be like him. I still shudder at these thoughts to this day. He'd turn and talk to me like nothing ever happened. I'd be dropped off at my mom's.

My mom's house was a lot different. It was me, my sister Aneela, and my mom. My mom was the opposite of the in-betweens; she was too mature for her age. She and the in-between had me young. For as long as I'd known my mom had been the one there. She bought me clothes, she bought me school supplies, she made sure I had clothes when I went to the in-betweens.

I remember lying in the top bunk of me and my sister's bunk bed. My sister Aneela got settled at the bottom, struggling a little because of how young she was at the time. My mom then silently walked in and helped my sister. She looks at me and asks me if I'm okay, and I nod my head. My mom then turned to the other side of me and my sisters shared room to turn off the main light, then turned back to turn on the small lamp on our nightstand, casting a warm light on our walls. She sat at one of our dining room tables she brought up the other night. She grabbed a book from the nightstand where the lamp sits, *A Wrinkle in Time*. Still in her work uniform, she would try and read it to us every night. We never finished the book, but she tried and that was all that mattered to me at the time, when I would come home from the in-betweens. At her house I could add to my childhood memories instead of tarnishing them. I could actually be a kid. The in-between always called me mature for my age, but I was only mature at his house because I had to be.

AMAYA GREER, GRADE II

The Truth-Telling Waterfall

I step out of my car, and my boots crunch into the rocky gravel parking lot. I am here, all alone, just me, my thoughts, and nature. I come here often, trying to escape the hectic and stressful events of life. For me, nature typically serves as a distraction, but today it feels like more.

I begin my hike by entering the tall Tennessee woods, the trail running alongside the flowing, marshy creek. As I turn the first corner, I hear the laughter of a happy couple. They pass me a few moments later, smiling, laughing, and enjoying each other's company.

"It looks like you two are having a great time!" I say, forcing a smile.

"Oh, we are! Isn't it beautiful out here?" the woman replies, her laughter still bubbling over.

"Absolutely!" I say, shrugging off the loneliness creeping in.

They keep going, and so do I, their laughter fading into the woods behind me. I take a moment to look around, taking in my surroundings and glancing at myself. It's just me, all alone. I push that thought to the back of my mind and press on through the beautiful Tennessee mountains.

I reach the first bridge and step carefully over the rushing creek. The wooden boards creak under my feet. Suddenly, a woman and her dog approach, both filled with joy.

“Good afternoon!” she beams as they pass by.

“Good afternoon,” I reply, but I can’t shake the weight in my chest, realizing it’s just me here.

I glance to my left, then to my right. No one is in sight. With that feeling of loneliness lingering, I continue my hike, making my way up toward the trail’s summit. The sound of the waterfall echoes through the trees, growing louder as I get closer. Along with it, I hear laughter and conversation from a group of friends nearby, welcoming me back to the connection I’ve been missing.

“Hey there! Enjoying the hike?” one of them calls, smiling warmly

“Yeah, I am,” I responded, forcing a smile.

“Join us if you want!” another friend shouts back.

“No, that’s okay, just taking it all in,” I reply, masking the feeling of loneliness creeping deeper.

They continue, their laughter blending with the sound of the waterfall. As I approach the base, the rush of water transforms into a calming melody, almost urging me to relax. I pause for a moment on the slick wooden bridge that spans the creek, mesmerized by the peaceful waterfall before me. I stand and let the gentle tones wash over me.

As I look around, I begin to notice all the little wonders in my surroundings. Minnows dart playfully in the creek, birds glide gracefully overhead, and shy deer peek out from the nearby woods.

“Hey there, little guys,” I whisper to the creatures watching me, “I guess you’re my company today.”

I smile, feeling lighter, and begin my climb to the peak of the waterfall. As I peer out at the clearing, I take in the lake below, letting the details of this natural escape wash over me.

“Just me and nature,” I mumble, absorbing the sounds around me. Mosquitoes buzz insistently in my ear, a man’s fishing pole whips through the air as it casts into the lake, and the chirps of baby birds call out from their nest nearby. Amid it all, the peaceful rush of the truth-telling waterfall pouring into the creek grounds me in this moment of solitude and clarity.

Now, I turn to head towards my car, following the same trail as I took to get here. I pause again, smiling at the base of the waterfall, as if it can see me.

“Thank you for showing me the truth.” I think to myself. The peaceful tones of the waterfall echo as if they are responding.

As I make my way back, each step feels lighter, the weight of loneliness dissipating with every breath of fresh mountain air. I find solace in the small wonders that surround me, the vibrant greens of the leaves, the delicate wildflowers pushing through the cracks in the rock, and the gentle rustle of the wind stirring the treetops.

With each passing moment, I realize that my solitude does not equate to loneliness; rather, it offers me an opportunity to connect with the beauty of the world around me and, in turn, with myself. The truth-telling waterfall has not only provided a tranquil escape but has also mirrored the journey of my own thoughts.

As I reach the parking lot, the chaotic buzz of the outside world begins to seep back in, but I feel different, renewed, enlightened. I glance back at the mountain, a silent promise whispered between us.

“Thank you,” I say softly to the majestic trees and the cascading water, knowing I will return.

With newfound clarity, I slide into my car, ready to face the world again, but this time, armed with the understanding that solitude can be a companion and nature a refuge. I turn the key in the ignition, feeling the gentle hum of the engine beneath me, and drive away, carrying the essence of the truth-telling waterfall in my heart.

TIMOTHY GRIFFIN, GRADE II

What I Have Learned about Being Transgender

Warning: Mature Content

Transgender. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word as “denoting or relating to a person whose gender identity does not correspond with the sex registered for them at birth.” We make up 0.5 to 1.5 percent of the population, but somehow 80% of news coverage follows our every move. News outlets and articles often describe us as dangerous, perverted, and or mentally ill. People in our own community degrade us. They call us degenerates or the reason as to why queer issues are not taken seriously. We face daily violence, threats against our lives, hate speech, and degradation. They say that the youth is under attack by the “Transgender virus” and they should protect their children from all of them. Two point million of them are thirteen or older. To those on the outside, they’d consider these people “too far gone” and “indoctrinated.” They then turn us into camps where they are punished for the thought of gender once at that point. Transgender for them means deplorable, ugly, pedophilic, wrong, insane, and more. This was the first thing I have learned.

I have lived my life as one of them. I eat, sleep, and breathe as a transgender man. The movements I take are precise and learned as to not upset those around me with my identity. Each breath I take without permission is an offense. My life derives from sin and evil, and my mind speaks against their scripture. I do not tell the tales of my childhood as a little girl in pink ribbons lives beneath my blue shadow. I do not open my mouth as the voice that escapes is not my own. I do not tug my shirt, fix my hair, or smile for fear of femininity. I carve my desired path of life through the sharp waves of my soul rather than follow through smooth edges of what’s laid in stone for me. I am too far gone. My mind has been etched and tainted with the privilege of identity, and I am not one to let go. I will live my life with young maturity and an early death. I have come to terms with the fact that I will die young and by the hands of the government. The blood of my people traces the White house steps, and I will only become another drop in the drenched concrete. This was the second thing I have learned.

Some of us, by the grace of God, escape their fate. Some live to have lives that society views as acceptable. We become doctors, lawyers, artists, musicians, actors, celebrities, superstars. All the mundane monotony of life becomes ours for sculpting. But that was before. Now we can only hope to live our lives without drowning in the slums with debt. We can only hope our brothers and sisters will stay safe, giving their bodies up for different perversions by those who put us here. A taboo desire. Unwilling to go farther than to feel the freedom they possess, ones that could only be brought by a life of hardship. We move along. We anchor, we work, we survive. This was the third thing I have learned.

We are often confirmed “firsts” of many positions. The first transgender woman to perform in Congress, Sarah McBride. The first to become an actress, Christine Jorgensen. The first to become prolific in medicine, Dr. Alan L. Hart. The first to throw a brick and insight riots at Stonewall which became a driving force in an event for queer rights, Marsha P. Johnson. We all have stories to share, ideas to make, and people to become. We share our lives with the world; we bare our hearts on our sleeves, show the world our souls and are still expected to show no care for our identity as then we would be undesirable. Being transgender is a game of four-dimensional chess with society followed by a Super Bowl game against your state, a dinner with your senator, a standoff with your country, and a meeting with your president watched by the theatric audience of the entire Earth’s population. You learned to follow the waves of the world whilst sailing against the current. This is the fourth thing I have learned.

There is no book on how to be transgender. No pamphlet, no show, no maps, nothing. There are no guidelines to follow. No stories to share. You become your own person, one who lives or one who dies. You will meet other people like you. Some will have funny names, others funny voices. Some will be tall and pale, others dark and burly. You will follow them in one herd, chasing a sense of belonging. You will train others who were like you a year before even if you still have no experience in this life. You will be scared, cold and alone. But there

will be someone who is scareder, colder and more alone. You will have to fight for them, prepared or not. Your life is like a key, your direction in life is the hole. You cannot follow those before you, nor can the people you have helped follow after you. You were born alone in this hole, and you will die alone in this hole. That is the fifth thing I have learned.

The last thing I learned was harder to comprehend. This world cannot handle the abstract minds of people like us. We can fight and conform, but we are forever shaped to change. People can look in our eyes and share our thoughts, conform to our standards, and live alongside us, but we still stick out. We are a missing piece in a thousand picture puzzle. We are the only red delicious among the eyes of galas in an apple orchard. We are noticed and pointed out. We will always stick out.

My life as a transgender man has forced me to learn and study all these burdens like a monk practicing scripture. I must remember my place, steady my footsteps, conform, take the degradation, be accepted, guide and be guided while forging my own path and finally then and only then can I live. That is all I have learned about being transgender in my sixteen years of living, but I know I'll have more. My life will get harder, my body will change, my mind will reel and I will have to come face to face with my soul. I hope these lessons can help someone learn better than I.

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RIVER HUBBARD, GRADE II

Alone

"We're going to adopt!" my parents say excitedly.

"What does that mean?" my brother, Blake, asked. "Well, we are going to be fostering two little girls. One is about a year and a half older than Rylee, and the other one is about 2 years younger. They will be staying in Rylee's room, so we will have to clear out some space," said my mom.

I stared at her, dumbfounded by what she just said. "What do you think, Rylee?" my dad said.

"Do we have to?" I asked, hoping they would say no.

"Everything is set in stone Rylee, and within the next couple of weeks, they will be here." I began to cry as my brother made fun of me, and my parents tried to comfort me, telling me everything would be fine.

Over the next couple of weeks, I watched as my parents got rid of almost all my toys and clothes and added two more beds; the room I once loved had become almost unrecognizable.

School had let out for summer break, and I was turning six soon. My mom was rushing to clean the house, yelling at everyone to make sure everything was perfect. Then they came, two blonde-headed girls stepped out of a white car with trash bags. I stared in disbelief as my parents and the social worker brought them in. Eventually, the social worker left, and as my parents made dinner, I talked to the girls upstairs, where I learned the oldest one was named Zoe and the younger one Arianna. Zoe stared at me as Arianna yelled at me to not touch her stuff as I tried to help her put up her clothes.

I quickly realized that Zoe did whatever Arianna told her to do. My sixth birthday party came up at Handsville swimming pool, as all my friends and family arrived. Everyone was intrigued by Zoe and Arianna. Everyone was talking, laughing, and asking them questions about themselves. I had a weird pit in my stomach from this, but I chose to ignore it and play with my friends. That's when Jayelah asked me, "Who are those two girls?"

"Oh, it's my foster sisters," I said.

Soon school started, and the question of who they were started again. We rode the bus home, and as I listened to Zoe talk about herself and her day, I waited for her to ask about mine, but it the question never came. Once the bus dropped us off around 4:30, we went into the house, and Mom asked Zoe a bunch of questions about how her day was. My brother had been home for about 2 hours since he was in middle school, and he had been playing on our trampoline with my cousin and the neighbors. While Mom talked to Zoe and Arianna, I went out back to get on the trampoline with them.

“Hey Rylee!” shouted my neighbors, Raleigh and Reece, who were about two years older than my brother. They were twins.

“Can I jump with you guys?” I asked.

“No!” my cousin Caden quickly yelled. Caden is about a year younger than my brother. I pouted and went back inside.

I opened the back door and saw my dad. He had just woken up to go work a twelve-hour night shift at a factory. He looked at me and didn’t say anything before walking into the kitchen.

“Hey Kevin!” Arianna shouts at my dad.

“Hey Arianna!” my dad says back.

“Me and the girls were thinking of going to the park,” Mom says.

“Oh, that will be fun,” Dad responds. I stood at the kitchen door in silence, looking at my mom and dad with Zoe and Arianna. I felt like I was going to be sick, so I walked to my bedroom, I looked at my room that used to be purple with unicorns on the wall, it was now pink with mermaids, because Arianna liked mermaids.

That weekend, my mom brought all of us to the park, including Caden, Raleigh, and Reece. While the boys played, Zoe, Arianna, and I went over the swing set. As Zoe and I started swinging, Arianna couldn’t get on the swing by herself because she was too little to push herself hard.

I got off my swing to push her. As I started pushing her, she started screaming that I was pushing her too hard, so I stopped.

Suddenly, Arianna fell off the swing and started to cry.

“What happened?” my mom asked while she was running to Arianna.

“She fell off the swing,” Zoe said quietly.

“Rylee we will talk about this later,” my mom said sternly as she carried Arianna away.

“Do you want to go on the slide?” I asked. “Yeah,” Zoe said. Zoe and I played for hours before my mom made us go home.

That night, once my mom put Zoe and Arianna to bed, my mom called me into my parents bedroom. “Rylee what has been your problem?” my mom said.

I felt my face get hot, “I don’t know,” I mumbled.

“Use your words Rylee, you’re a big girl.” mom said as she was getting angrier.

“I feel alone.” I said quietly.

RYLEE LOMBARDI, GRADE II

Growing Up

For a young person, I have developed a rather morbid fixation with the passage of time. It appears to me that time sprints ceaselessly and ever-quickly. It is not afraid to leave me behind. I lose chunks of it in an instant, often unaware that I have lost a chunk until it is too late. These realizations have gotten more difficult to grapple with as I have gotten older. I know that sooner rather than later, I will be grown up and forced to face the world head-on.

The fleeting passage of time first hit me right before the beginning of my junior year of high school. The cross-country team had recently started official practices a few weeks before school was back in session. With

all the older runners having graduated the year before, I had become the oldest and fastest girl on our team. I found myself stepping into a new leadership role; I led warm-ups, stretches at the end of practice, and created running routes through trails. I kept the younger kids accountable for their workouts and always pushed them to do their best. I became the designated older girl for taping their feet or shins or knees for support when they got injured. It was a surreal experience to go from feeling completely lost and alone in my freshman year to being referred to as “Mom” by a band of energetic middle schoolers barely two years later.

The change came with a variety of emotions. I gained a lot of confidence in myself. A sense of satisfaction fluttered in my stomach every time I called out a stretch or exercise, and the group listened. Pride bloomed in my heart each time one of my littles fought through the burn in their muscles and rushed up a hill with determination. It made my heart soar to watch them cheer their little hearts out for every one of their teammates from the sidelines of races. At the same time, it was hard for me to internalize that I was now the oldest. I was now a role model; my every move monitored by little minds that soak in the actions that surround them. It was terrifying to have such a huge influence on young people while still being quite young myself. I often asked myself, “How can I lead if I don’t even know what I’m doing?”

Just a few weeks after the season ended, a solo run on a familiar forest trail at Sugar Hollow Park was another instance that made me realize how quickly time was moving. I was zipping through the trees breathlessly, weaving carefully through the winding roots of the forest floor. The wind lashed against my cheeks, whipping my ponytail back. Wisps of hair wiggled loose from the hairstyle and tickled the tops of my ears. The cold air singed my lungs. The only sound amidst the trees was my jagged breathing and the rhythmic pounding of my heart in time with my footsteps. My eyes remained trained on the ground as I zipped through the trees, placing every footstep carefully despite my familiarity with this particular trail.

As my gaze followed the entangled roots ahead of me, I noticed the small piles of browned leaves littered across the forest floor. This was typical of mid-November; by then, the leaves had long since shed their green coverings of spring and scattered messily across the forest floor. The trees had been bare for a long time, but it struck me that I had missed the change. My pounding heart skipped a beat, and my feet pattered to a stop in a wooded clearing. Dizziness overcame me as I fought to catch my breath. I peered straight up to the sky to take in the naked tree limbs swaying above, feeling sick to my stomach. It was odd that I had not noticed the turn of the leaves. I run almost every day, most often in the forest trails that litter Sugar Hollow. How did I miss it?

Shortly after, I remember having a conversation with my mom in our tiny living room in which another small detail I had missed came to my attention. We were having one of our long talks; the kind of conversation where we talk about anything and everything that comes to mind. We usually started the discussions on a serious topic, but somehow, we always found ourselves laughing by the end of the conversation. I recall that on this particular day, we had started talking through one of my school-related worries. At some point, we began to discuss something that had happened to my mom at work. We were both doubled over laughing by the end of her story, gasping for breath between fits of giggles.

“Did he really say that to you?” I asked, able to collect myself just long enough to ask the question.

“He did. I couldn’t believe it either,” she answered. I snorted, and we were both overcome with another fit of giggles. I crossed my arms over my middle, my stomach aching from laughter.

“I can’t breathe,” I gasped, feeling as though my sides were splitting.

“I can’t either!” she said. She had the hugest smile on her face. We laughed for a while after, adding in little quips and jokes here and there to keep the humor alive.

In the midst of our chuckles, I noticed the sunlight shimmering through the sheer curtains covering the windows behind me. It caressed the lines and edges of my mother’s smiling face. From my angle, I could see shiny gray and white streaks scattered across her head of dark, curly hair. Although I found the sprinkles of gray beautiful, sadness shrouded my heart at the realization that my mother was aging. It pained me to wonder

how many more of these conversations we had left. It frightened me to think that I might have to ask the question, “How long do I have left with her?” soon.

Not long after I noticed my mother’s gray hairs, I turned seventeen. The day of my seventeenth birthday felt like any other day. It was a Thursday- just another arbitrary event on a random day of the week. I did not feel any older or wiser. I felt the same as I had when I turned sixteen, which, funnily enough, was the same way I felt when I turned fifteen.

Although nothing had really changed, my heart jumped into my throat when I counted seventeen lit candles on my birthday cake. It felt like everything around me was moving in slow motion as my family sang the familiar tune of “Happy Birthday” in our dimly lit kitchen. I blew out the candles in one big exhale, feeling the gravity that comes with being a year away from adulthood settle in my chest. Although the prospect of freedom and independence were deeply compelling, the fear of failure and the future loomed over me like a storm cloud.

My mom flicked the main lights back on, and I plucked each of the colorful candles out carefully. I rolled the last one between my fingers and molded its softened wax under my touch, unable to shake the unsettling feeling that life was on fast forward. Even though I was seventeen, I still felt like a lost child. I had no idea who I wanted to be, and that night made me realize that I did not have a lot of time left to figure it out. I thought back to all the times when I had been on the cusp of becoming a teenager and idolized the idea of growing up. I yearned to drive, to be independent, to make a romantic connection, to do all the things a little twelve-year-old was not old enough to do. All of it seemed so far away at the time, and here I was- seventeen. How did I get here so quickly?

A few days later, I drove to my old middle school to watch my little brother’s basketball game. I already felt nostalgic walking into the school, reminiscent of the time I spent wandering its very halls a few years earlier. I watched his game from the bird’s-eye view: the balcony of the gymnasium. I smiled in disbelief as I watched him expertly dip, weave, and dribble. This was the first year he had ever played basketball, and yet, he was already playing like a master.

As I studied his moves on the court, I recognized that he was significantly taller than most of the other kids playing. The cacophony of cheers, shoe squeaks, and bouncing basketballs became overwhelming as a vague knot of nausea twisted in my stomach. The knot tightened when I picked him up from the locker room after his game, realizing with a start that he was several inches taller than I was. We chatted about his game on our way out of the school, and I wracked my mind trying to recall ever noticing the drastic change in his height. I found myself asking, “When did he get so tall?”

That night, I found myself studying my features in the mirror. The longer I looked, the more I saw my parents in the lines and edges of my face. I saw my mother in the line of my nose, the curve of my cheeks, and the cupid’s bow in my lips. My father was in the bluish grey color of my eyes, the darkness of my hair, and the line of my brows. I leaned closer to the reflective glass. I realized that my face was longer, my jawline sharper, and my eyes darker than they had been before. There was a new darkness to my face that I had never seen- a loss of innocence. With a jolt, it dawned on me that I looked older. I looked like a woman.

The weight of that realization sat deep in my chest. There was no way for me to slow time or turn it back. There was no escape, and the prospect of growing up terrified me. The bills, appointments, groceries, work, and all the other extra responsibilities that come with it made my mind spin. Even the prospect of independence had its drawbacks; I would be gaining freedom in exchange for more stress. My future seemed more of a hazy idea than a tangible prospect. So many questions filled my mind: What if I am not successful? What if I cannot figure out who I am? What if I end up unhappy and alone?

What I realized then was that I had no choice but to face that fear. Time was going to pass, and there was no way to ignore its relentless pull. I was going to grow up whether I liked it or not. The only thing I could do was take it one day at a time. I might fail, I might fall on my face, and I might not always be happy, but if I let

my fear consume me, then I have already failed. The best thing I can do is prepare and have courage. I have to do it scared.

AMANDINE REGIN, GRADE II

Spotlight

DING DING DING! I unlocked my phone to see thousands of texts from my so-called best friend and some of her accomplices. The school day has just ended, and I am in my room, rainbow fairy lights on the wall, yellow tinted light illuminating my room. My eyes start to well up as I see these hurtful words come from the people whom I thought so much of, the ones who I thought were my friends.

I had always been a nice kid at school, like Goldilocks I was not too loud, not too quiet, I was just right. I always got my work done on time. I dressed nicely, not too fancy but also not too laid back. I got up early, not sunrise early, but early enough to get to school on time. I was often told that I was a good student and more-or-less, a good girl. But one day a horrible experience would change my life forever.

I was in elementary school at the time; The room was bright, too bright. It looked like a child's wonderland; cartoon cutouts, an unusual wall color, and the iconic, painfully wide toothed smile the teacher kept plastered onto her face. I was standing by the elementary school equivalent of a high schooler's locker except this "locker" did not have any personalized items. All it contained was my bright colored bookbag, a matching lunchbox, and my coat (just in case it got chilly). It was at that wooden "locker" where I encountered my first bullying experience. I do not remember the specific details of it, but at the time it was an earthshaking, life-changing event. It had changed me in a way that I cannot describe. All I know is that after that day I vowed to strive to be a better person.

After that day, I had to do whatever I thought was right. I turned into a tattletale just because I thought it was the moral thing to do, and I stuck up for my autistic friend no matter what was being said or done to my friend. I thought I was changing the world. I thought I was making a change. I thought I mattered.

After some time, I finally came across Theatre Bristol. Theatre Bristol is a community theatre that gave me a chance, a chance to be myself for once. I still remember my first audition for Junie B. Jones Jingle Bells. I walked into the theatre blinded by the bright lights. Quickly, I got sent back into a yellow painted room, full of metal-ringed blue chairs. I remember looking around and seeing props and set pieces used for other shows, some that I knew and some I did not. Eventually it was my turn to audition. I walked into the theatre, stepped onto the stage. I looked down and realized the floor was pitch black but had tiny little white scuff marks on it, possibly from past sets. The moment the audition ended, a lifetime of crippling doubt vanished, replaced by a soaring, extraordinary sense of freedom that finally broke my chains.

Since that audition, theatre has always been a safe getaway for me. It allows me not to be myself. No longer am I a pimply faced girl who feels like she needs to act happy all the time just to achieve a mediocre day. She can be a ghost photographer who misses her husband dearly, a shopkeeper who sells woolens during the 1800s in Great Britain, or she can even be a little boy with an elf as a brother who loves to eat cold leftover spaghetti for breakfast. She can be whoever she wants. She does not have to be bullied anymore. She does not have to act happy. She can be whoever she wants, whenever she wants. The world just stops for one moment, and she gets to be in the spotlight, and, for once, be cheered on instead of torn down.

I am glad theatre showed up for me when it did because I desperately needed it for my middle school years. For example, when I was in the seventh grade, we had auditions for the spring musical Shrek Jr., and I had decided to audition for the role of Fiona. Surely it was my turn to audition. That is when I noticed the tan walls and the grey tiled flooring turned into quicksand. The cartoon singing animals on the wall morphed into little devils watching and criticizing my every move, but I swallowed my fear and auditioned. I waited and waited for the cast list to come out, and eventually it did. I sat in my chair anxiously waiting for the announcement.

My leg was bouncing, my heart was pounding, and I was as pale as a ghost with anticipation. Then, I heard the announcement that I was Fiona! I was so ecstatic I could have jumped up and down. It was my first big break in the theatre industry! However, not everyone felt joy at my happy news.

As soon as I walked out of the room, the whispers began. I heard them mock my talent and the questioning of my casting nearly shattered my heart.

From that day on, the lights felt blindingly bright and the makeup suffocatingly heavy, turning my getaway into my own personal Hell. I still managed to put on a bright wide-toothed grin and perform. While I walked to class, I heard people criticize me for how I did a scene or how I sang, but I tried not to let that bother me. For a job well done, I received sun-yellow and royal purple flowers that smelled like a candy shop. Months later, the show was over and the hate started to go away (or at least that is what I had thought).

It was nearing the end of my seventh-grade year. The sun was shining, birds were chirping, and flowers were blooming causing a beautiful fresh scent to spread everywhere. Everyone was happy since school was almost out for summer break. And then, suddenly, DING! I looked down at my phone, and I saw an unknown number had sent me a text. The first words I read were “hey Libby.” I felt like I had just swallowed my tongue. This person knew me, but how did they get my number? Who even was this? I continued reading the message with profanity and insults everywhere. I did not know how to feel, and I did not know how to act so I just plainly asked “who is this?” They did not tell me. Suddenly the bright sunny day with jade green grass and beautiful flowers started to morph into an incredibly cloudy and frigid day. The flowers had wilted and the grass faded into a muddy mixture of brown and grey. I instantly felt as if I had been stabbed in the gut when I saw that in the texts they had mocked my religion. Even after that, I tried to “take the high road” and be nice while trying to figure out who that person was, but my efforts were futile whilst the texter continued to mock and berate me, my faith, and things that I love. Finally, after this case of back and forth, the person on the other side of the screen stated that I did not know them. My heart stopped beating when I read that text. Obviously, they knew me. They had my number and had enough information about me that they felt comfortable to hate me.

I had to deal with this incident practically by myself. Obviously, I did not want to, but even the vice principal at my school told me, “It’s too hard to investigate.” So, I fell. I fell so deep it was hard to come back up. I fell into a pit of depression and anxiety that was so dark and so cold that I basically had frostbite.

Another show came, and while I got the part I wanted, it did not feel right. I felt as if I was constantly looking over my shoulder. My ears strained to hear the murmurs that were whispered among my peers. No matter how hard I tried to prevent the bullying, it always came back. Throughout the show, I was bullied. My once “happy place” was tainted with hurtful sneers and hateful glares.

My family and friends knew about the bullying, but all they could ever mutter was, “Don’t worry about it - they’re just jealous of you.” I tried to force myself into believing this was true. In retrospect, I know that my family and friends were just trying to be helpful and encouraging, but it was an unintentional lie. I now know that they basically did not know what else to say or do to try to ease my fears or remedy the situation, but a lie nonetheless. After that, however, I ended up having a sequence in my life where I was on an all-time high.

It quickly became school time again, and I was finally in high school. I had a best friend, and life was great. The halls were larger and had a new feel to them. They were inviting, the floor was sparkly, my bag felt lighter, and the school had a nice floral scent to it. Would this be my year? Would the bullying end? I not only wanted to be accepted but genuinely liked so I plastered on my biggest, brightest smile while hoping for the best.

In the school’s gym, my friends and I were in the black and orange bleachers that had trash strewn about. With every step I took, I was able to feel the sticky soda from the past basketball game. Lighthearted discussions of no importance were bounced around until a dark subject took over the conversation. I was told one of my friends was having severe mental issues that started to become physical. I felt a boulder of concern crush my heart.

I did not know how to help her. What could I do or what could I say? I loved my friend and it absolutely devastated me to know that she was hurting herself. So, I did the one thing I knew I had to do. On the posters in the guidance counselor's office and before and after every Netflix special, it says if you know someone that needs help, tell someone that can help. I did not have a website or an 800 number handy, so I told her older sister. I knew they were close and even shared a room. I thought maybe the older sister would be able to help her or even seek help for her. Alas, unbeknownst to me, the only thing that happened was my social execution.

When I returned home from school that day, I quickly realized that I had become a public enemy. I opened my phone to messages from my so-called "friends." Words like "backstabber" and "gossip" flooded my screen. More-or-less, I was diabolical for seeking help for my friend in need. According to them, I needed to learn to keep my mouth shut and then, they told me I was not worthy enough to be their friend. My world crumbled. Crushed and devastated twice in less than twenty-four hours.

The next day, I went to school and feigned a smile on my face. As I walked into the cafeteria, I felt swallowed whole by the narrowed eyes throwing daggers my way via glances and glares. Not knowing where to sit, I found a little lonesome, isolated spot in the corner and sat down. It was as if a spotlight was directly on me. It was too hot and blinding. It was beyond uncomfortable; it burned. I heard my name. I saw one of my "friends" talking to another girl. The other girl looked like a bull with a matador. Her eyes pierced my soul and seethed out sheer hatred. That was when I heard her say that I should just kill myself.

My world stopped, the walls closed in and I felt suffocated. I should just kill myself? I wanted to help a friend. I was genuinely concerned for her well-being and thought that I was doing the right thing. But according to my peers, I should just kill myself.

After that day, it got to the point where I was scared to go into that building. I tried to ignore the looks and whispers. I even disassociated myself from the people I once called my closest friends. People that I had talked to daily; we had sleepovers and even went on vacation together. People that I had loved, and I thought that they loved me. It hurt but I blocked them. My eyes ached from all the tears and my chest felt heavy from the turmoil. I did have a sliver of hope, though, that maybe my problems would be over as I closed that chapter of my life. However, that sliver became a sharp shard when my supposed "best friend" texted me saying that I deserved to be threatened. That is when I had lost myself completely, destroyed and engulfed in despair.

My mask began to slip the following days, and I began to fight back. Unfortunately, that just made the situation worse. In class, I began to hear the disgusting whisper in my ear of the word greasy. Greasy was apparently my new name. Anytime I heard that word, I was instantly on edge. All I could see was her sinister little grin. The room became an abyss in that moment, everything floated away, and I was stuck in a void, devastatingly alone. In a desperate plea for survival, I went to every ethical adult I was advised to confide in, from counselors to top Administration. As a result, I went through that whole semester being brutally bullied with no resolution.

That was two years ago. I continued that whole semester being bullied. Thankfully, once summer break arrived, it seemed as if everyone forgot. I, however, did not. I still think about the incident repeatedly. By the grace of God, the sting has been eased by time. Time is the only thing that can heal a wound. I still have my scars, but they have healed over time and are less noticeable.

Bullying ruins lives. When I was being bullied, I had a spotlight shining into my eyes, blinding, and burning. When I reflect on that time in my life, I mourn for the girl that I was before and feel remorse for the person that I became. Sometimes the mocking comes back causing the wounds to burst open and start bleeding again, but they have been able to heal for some time now. At this point I am on a stage. A stage I feel more comfortable on, but that spotlight will forever remain.

ELIZABETH STREET, GRADE II

Perfect

Today is the worst, most grueling day of my entire second grade career. I could not pretend to be impressed by the fifth graders' art, as I walked through the halls this Friday morning. I kept staring at the half-heartedly thrown together art projects, I reminded myself that they were "trying their best." Even if their best was a lopsided heart with a smiley face in the middle. I kept on walking.

"Good morning," sang all of my classmates as I entered the room full of dread. I forced a smile on my face, which probably looked more like a grimace. Truthfully, it had not been an especially good morning for me. When I woke up, I stared at my ceiling as I assessed what I had to do for the day. Something was different. Something was wrong. My heart was racing and my mind was anything but calm. It took me all of two seconds to remember why today was so important.

When I finally, begrudgingly climbed out of bed, I could hear my mom waking up my older sisters. My mom never woke me up. She often told me that I was "self-sufficient." I could pour my own cereal, pick out my own clothes, and get myself ready. Even though my sisters were "trying their best", they still needed extra attention from my mom. Extra attention for them meant less attention for me.

As I sat in class, I could not pretend to be in a light-hearted mood. I was watching my classmates discuss their plans for sleepovers this weekend while playing with the filthy communal toys, when my friend Lacy begged me to get in line with her for some unappetizing, colorless breakfast. I knew that I would be unable to stomach it, so I said no.

She went with Miranda instead.

I could not let Lacy's childish antics get to me, especially today.

Ultimately, I decided that taking a walk to the bathroom would help me calm the impatient, annoying butterflies that were lining my stomach. After building up the courage and perfecting what I was going to say, I decided to get up to ask the teacher. As soon as my worn-down chair started to scrap the floor, my teacher began to walk to the front of the brightly, almost too brightly, decorated classroom. I pretend to stretch my legs, in order to save me from the beading, judgmental eyes of my classmates.

I gently scooted my barely-blue chair back into the desk.

I tried to listen to my teacher.... I really did. But I could not force myself to listen to her pleading with my classmates to turn in their work. Work that I had turned in two weeks ago. As I was about to drift off into another daydream, I heard my teacher shift her tone. "I know that you are all excited to find out what you made on your end of the year assessment," my teacher exclaimed half-heartedly. In response, the rest of the class let out various groans of disagreement. A slight curve met the edge of my pencil-thin lips.

"Before I hand back these scores, I want to remind you all that all I am looking for was improvement, not a perfect score," warned my teacher, while making occasional eye contact with Lacy. Lacy was not dumb, even if her grades hinted at it. The problem is that she would rather play with her dolls than do her homework or study. She did not have discipline, but I could not focus on Lacy, not today.

As our teacher handed out the scores, I watched everyone's faces. Some people were happily surprised with their scores, showing their friends with a proud smile. Others' faces had turned a bright shade of firehouse red immediately upon looking at their papers, shoving their papers in their backpacks before anyone could see. But I saw, I always saw. I took note of some eighty-fives, a few seventy-sixes, two six-eights, and one eighty-nine.

I was last. I was always last.

I had not realized that as my teacher was handing out the scores, my butterflies had decided that it was prime time to test out their backflips. A trick that they only pulled out on special occasions.

The teacher finally made her way to my desk. As she laid my paper down with a smile, She whispered, "Good job, Perfect as always."

I flashed her a quick grin and squeaked out, "Thank you."

As I looked down at my paper, I saw it. The one thing that makes my heart skip a beat. A gold star. There it was. The star was glistening; the morning sun had woken up just in time to illuminate it.

While waiting in the pick-up line, I kept imagining what my mom would say about my star. Maybe she will hang it up on the fridge, like she does with my sisters' artwork, I thought as I watched my mom drive up in her red minivan.

The butterflies that I felt that day never went away. Sometimes they were quieter, other times they would reach a new peak. As time went on, the pressures only became more and more intense.

Now I am a freshman in high school. Often, I still think about that moment in second grade. The moment that I realized how powerful being perfect is.

One, two, three, and four... I memorize the counts as I practice my jumps.

"Chloe, your jumps are perfect," Lacy exclaimed as she was stretching. I flash her a quick smile and keep practicing the material for tryouts.

Last week Lacy convinced me to try out with her for the cheer team. I had a week to learn EVERYTHING. I practiced, and practiced, and practiced some more. Now it is time for the test. It is time for tryouts.

Lacy and I were the last group to be called into the gym for tryouts. It went perfectly, or at least it did for me. Lacy ended up going on the wrong counts; maybe she would make the jv team.

I ended up making varsity and surprisingly, so did Lacy. Our first few years on the team were pretty mundane; we were mostly in the back since we were underclassmen. But now we are Juniors and it is our time to shine.

The gold stars that I received in my youthful years have now turned into bigger, shinier trophies. In fact, my goal was to bring home one of those trophies today.

Today is the state cheer competition. This competition is the hardest one yet. We are competing against five other teams. Not to mention, our head flyer broke her ankle during last week's practice, so I had to fill her spot.

When my coaches pulled me aside and warned me that I would be taking on her position, the butterflies filled my entire body. They had broken free from the shackles of my stomach. We had to have multiple emergency practices in order to prepare ourselves for this competition.

My team was next up on the mat. You could feel the tension not only among the athletes, but also the fans. Everyone was counting on us. Everyone was counting on me to step up.

My teammates and I watched the team before us perform a flawless routine. We would have to be just as perfect as them in order to have a chance of winning.

As the team before us ran off the mat, I realized that the butterflies in my stomach were turning my legs into mush. I could barely move.

"And nowww for the Virginia High Cheerleaders!" yelled the announcer.

Even though my legs were gelatinous, my body found the strength to move them. As I ran onto the mat and stared into the bright lights, I thought about my younger self. I hoped that I was making her proud.

Everything was going perfectly, our stunts were hitting, our tumbling passes were connecting, and our motions were sharp enough to cut bread. It was time for the final pyramid. I nailed this pyramid a million times, I could almost smell the gold, shiny trophy. As I was going up to hit the ending pose, I felt my right knee give out. "Chloe, stop it, pull yourself together," I thought as I plummeted to the ground.

As soon as my body hit the mat, I knew that something was not right. Everyone gasped, and not in a good way. "How could I let this happen to me," I thought as the competition paramedics rushed towards me. "I was supposed to be perfect," I whispered as they carried me off.

Suddenly, I woke up in a hospital room. “Was this all a bad dream,” I thought to myself as I looked around. The room was blindingly bright and looked as if Kim Kardashian had decorated it. One more blink and I was out again.

The next thing I knew, I was at home in my bed. I tried to get up, but I felt a sharp pain in my knee. I looked down to see what had happened, but it was covered in a bright pink cast.

The weeks following my accident were the worst weeks of my life. I flunked my first test because I could not sleep at night. Every time I closed my eyes the accident replayed over and over again. The cheer team had quickly found a replacement for me. It was as if I had never mattered to them.

I spent the next few months learning how to walk again. It turns out that when you tear two and a half ligaments in your knee, you are lucky if you are even able to stand. Throughout all of my recovery, no one was there for me. People would periodically check in on me, as if they had an alarm telling them to do so. But no one remained by my side throughout my entire recovery.

Months later, I began to submit my college admission essay when I decided to reread the paper one more time. I caught a few mistakes, but I decided to let them go. I finally submitted my essay, but this time I did not feel any butterflies. In fact, I have not felt butterflies in a while. I feel empty. I feel free. For the first time, imperfect is perfect enough.

CHLOE WARD, GRADE II

Barter Theatre Young Playwrights Festival
Semifinalist: Jonas Price of Virginia High School

In the fall of 2025, VHS Senior Jonas Price was named a Semifinalist in Barter Theatre’s Young Playwrights Festival for his play *The Canvas and the Artist*. This is a large regional festival with 300-400 plays submitted annually from schools all over the area (TN included). Jonas’s achievement is evidence of his vivid imagination and talent for writing great dialogue.

Canvas and the Artist features James, a man who lives a boring, conventional life but--upon death--is offered a chance to become God. Congratulations to Jonas for crafting a thought-provoking and entertaining play.

CANVAS AND THE ARTIST

Setting: In a room T’Nuliv had created to interact with James Johnson
outside of reality

JAMES JOHNSON: He/Him, Ordinary man, bland, uninteresting, given the
decision of taking T’nuliv’s role as a deity past deities

T’NULIV: It/it, incomprehensible past divine being taking the form of an
older person (hard to tell gender from appearance,) enjoys creating from
nothing, dying, wants James to take its place.

SCENE ONE

*(Lights. A room with smeared colors, abstract items, and trinkets from all
sorts of periods of human history are revealed, sitting upon an assortment
of chronologically varied furnishings. Two chairs and a coffee table are
seated in the center, with T’nuliv sitting in the rightmost seat. James en-
ters slowly through the door, his expression showing bewilderment. T’nuliv
smiles, extending his arms from his sides.)*

T'NULIV

...Ah, truly wonderful! You've finally shown yourself! Do come in... please, rest your corporeal form...

JAMES

...Wh... huh...? Wait... H-hold on, am... who-

T'NULIV

(Cut off) Take a moment, Mr. Johnson... breathe, consume a liquid... anything your mortal shell requires to calm down. Eighty rotations around the sun is quite monumental for a singular human, isn't it?

JAMES

Who... who the hell are you? Where am I? What does... (looks down at himself, raising his hands and inspecting his body) I-I'm... y-young again...?

T'NULIV

I held the belief that you wouldn't exactly enjoy your older self's body, no? Now, inform me. What do your natural instincts tell you to designate me as?

JAMES

(Hesitates, before gagging and speaking strained.) H-H... mn... T... Nuliv... gh...

T'NULIV

How interesting... I would've expected a much more... median response from someone so famili- (cuts itself off) Nonetheless... T, or Nuliv?

JAMES

B-both, none, I don't care! I just need to know who you are... where I am... how I'm still alive... e-everything! What is this place?! Am I in hell?! Heaven?! Are you God?! Or the devil, or... o-or...

(starts hyperventilating)

T'NULIV

Oh, dear James... all will be answered in due time. Simply throwing, what is, mere jargon to define this form before you is simply a mirthfully insulting endeavor. (Smiles slightly, placing hands on the table) My designated name is apparently, as of now, T'Nuliv, Mr. Johnson. I would disclose that it would be a pleasure to make your acquaintance, but... (shakes head, chuckling as it speaks) ...I've held that for a prolonged time by now.

JAMES

What does that mean?! I-I... (takes a breath to control his hyperventilation) ...Okay... just... l-let me... let me breathe for a second, please...

T'NULIV

Certainly... take a rest. I created a seat for you across from me.

(Gestures across from the table to a vacant armchair.)

JAMES

(Hesitantly sits down) ...I... I thought I died.

T'NULIV

You remember correctly, yes... only a few solar minutes ago, your physical form had passed via a complication with your heart... Coronary Artery Disease, to be more specific, while surrounded by your dear Samantha, two children, office coworkers and baskets upon vases of roses, sunflowers and hydrangeas... it will be quite the harrowing task for your company to find anyone who could match your expertise... your lack of... anything, but... perhaps, no one could. (reclines back in the chair) Yet, I wouldn't exactly worry about that right now... for there are certainly much higher priorities to discuss.

JAMES

(was looking around as T'nuliv spoke, before focusing back on it) ...Are you the Grim Reaper?

T'NULIV

By your personal belief, you could designate me as such... but in all facets, no. I did pluck your very soul from the cycle of death, yet that figure would deliver to it... besides, wouldn't I be carrying a scythe and adorning a black robe according to you?

JAMES

I guess that's a good point... then, um... a-are you some kind of angel?

T'NULIV

(Laughs suddenly, shaking its head, ending with cough) ...Oh, what fun! That is the very first time in my entire presence in existence that I've been compared to a servant... yet, alas, no.

JAMES

...God?

T'NULIV

By technicality? A possibility... but I do not bear that title. I've held no moniker, exactly... and, admittedly, it is quite comedic to observe an attempt to designate me with one. (reclines further back in the chair). If this will put it into perspective for you, Mr. Johnson, I am that I am... all things you have felt, witnessed and overcome had stemmed from my very artistry. I had given your very world the freedom of the concepts of truth, ideals and imagination, and let intelligence germinate through a very, very carefully made existence... I had made landscapes to make things feel small. Oceans and mountains to define limits. Empty planets to feel lonely with and stars to dream upon. Colors to savor. Sounds to dance, and music to weep with. Sight to observe... and touch to understand. Emotions to guide, reason to define... and most imperatively, room to grow. I had given existence the struggles and strife to suppress and pressure, yet the salvations to breed determination and perseverance... and everything else followed! Life and the soul manifested... which followed with dreams and intellect! From there,

it was only a matter of time for this... glorious cacophony to breed a set of minds worthy of my desired objective.

JAMES

(stunned) I-I'll just call you God. That's a lot simpler.

T'NULIV

As you wish.

JAMES

...So, um... did you create me?

T'NULIV

Not directly, no... I couldn't have made such a fascinatingly bare specimen like yourself... not that I couldn't... and in fact, I've tried directly... but you... you are wonderful... and charmingly serendipitous.

JAMES

I'm... bare? Wonderful? What do you mean?

T'NULIV

Bare. There is nothing to you. (says with a chuckle) Nothing notable... nothing unique, or colorful... nothing but nothing!

JAMES

Hold on, that's just... (slightly offended) That's just not true! I have a wife, kids, a great job... I make (cut off).

T'NULIV

Had.

JAMES

I HAD a life making paper! That was my own!

T'NULIV

You only pursued such career due to another's suggestion, rather than your own volition! You never truly existed with autonomy, and thus... (eyes widen with a smile) Hm...

JAMES

...What? What is it?

T'NULIV

Do inform me... if you claim that your very existence isn't as bare as you say it to be... then why don't you regale to me of it?

JAMES

...That, uh... that to means tell you, right?

T'NULIV

Certainly. (slight cough) You're brighter, yet dimmer than you appear.

JAMES

(Unsure how to take the response, scrunched face) ...Uh... thanks? I-I mean... do you want me to tell you... everything? Like... about my life, and... stuff.

T'NULIV

The briefest angstrom of summaries, if you will.

JAMES

...But you're like... God, right? Wouldn't you already know what's happened? Why would I need to tell you?

T'NULIV

(Smirks, glancing at the audience for a moment) ...For emphasis, let's say.

JAMES

Okay, then... um... (takes a breath) ...I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in a hospital, obviously... uh... my mom's name was Emma, and my dad's was Liam. We lived in a nice house... like a... colonial home, and... I had a good childhood, overall! I-I had nice parents, we went on vacation, we donated to church... me and my dad played fantasy football all the time, while my mom taught me stuff about finances and... stuff. (thinking silently) And school was pretty good... like, I stayed out of trouble and had good grades... I graduated with a standard diploma and eventually got a job at a paper company, like I wanted... I-I even became the manager! I eventually met my wife- (stammers) I-I mean, who... was my wife, Samantha. We married, then had some children... (Thinks for a moment, realizing) ...James and Samantha Jr. We... went on vacation, and I played... fantasy football with James Jr, and... had Samantha become a secretary. I, um... I was the manager for fifty years... until...

T'NULIV

You died. From the most common of causes of death, surrounded by the most common of flowers and those that frequented your daily life... those you had intentionally, yet indirectly made as sterile as yourself. Do you understand what I've tried to communicate to you?

JAMES

(silent) ...I wasn't... unique, was I? I was just... (silent again) ...following the crowd.

T'NULIV

(contemplating) ...This really is the first time you've thought for yourself, isn't it? (slowly smiles) ...The very first symptoms of autonomy, realizing your mistakes, and truly, for once in your existence, having your own ideas and forming your very own imagination! All it took was death to understand how your life was so lacking! (expression slowly turns neutral, speaks somberly) ...It took the very end.

JAMES

(tearing up, wiping his face) ...Is that why you brought me here? Just to... insult me? Point out my flaws and how I messed up in life?

T'NULIV

...No... it is not. The truth is that... I understand you, Mr. Johnson. I'm aware of how it feels for one's existence to be... completely expressionless... to be a canvas, devoid of any thought or liberated ideals... and I didn't summon you here to emphasize your specific follies of vacancy. (silent shaking of its head) ...For I was exactly like you. I existed in the exact same vain, my beliefs, truths, expressions and motivations without color, or thought or... anything. It had been quite recently- for me at least, that I had realized my own follies... and it was far too late. (sighs) ...I will put this simply. I'm dying, James.

JAMES

(eyes widen) ...What? Wait... y-you're dying?

T'NULIV

(shakes its head with a defeated chuckle) ...It was... some time ago, you see. I had minor, yet major disagreements with another being similar to myself, both in capabilities and capacities... and so, acting exactly like the primitive organisms of earth... we acted on our base instincts like barbarous heathens... and quarreled. Our laws of existence, identities and essences clashed spectacularly, leaving the both of us mortally injured... yet... in all facets, both of us had lost. When the metaphorical smoke had dissipated, it had left the both of us... (makes quotations with fingers) ...bleeding out, to simplify the explanation. Our immortality had been capped, leaving us both with a fading Esse... and I am currently on its periphery. (smiles slightly) So, in a desperate, last expression of my ability, I had created... an existence. One to breed life hopefully similar to my consciousness, and overtime... I began to feel... colorful. Tragedy had left me laughing like a comedy. The wondrous results of strict limitations, such as existential laws and forces of nature were so bright and... grandiose. And seeing you among them, so valiantly dull... it was stunningly, captivatingly familiar.

JAMES

Then why didn't you just tell me outright? Without just... hurting me?

T'NULIV

I felt as though you required a revelation of what you were... so that, if you accept what I'm about to offer you, you will have your opportunities to transform into something more prismatic than the life known as James Johnson... and, in retrospect... I do believe that I came on a little strong... yet, I'm too close to my own conclusion to feel any regrets.

JAMES

...I... guess that makes sense, but... (perks up, nervous) What are you... offering me?

T'NULIV

(sighs woefully) ...Divinity, godhood, sanctity... whichever platitude you would use to phrase it... or, more aptly, my existence. I am offering you, a canvas surrounded by pieces of art... to become the artist... to usurp and acquire my liberation. You will assume my position as the overseer of

existence, and, from there, make whatever changes you've wished to commit. Laws, glories, instincts, souls... all that is, will be your paint, canvas, and easel. Surrounded by colors... you will be Wuji... pure potential, from where all things stem.

JAMES

(hesitantly speaks, overwhelmed) ...Y-you're... giving me your powers?

T'NULIV

Quite.

JAMES

...But... what if... what if I-I refuse?

T'NULIV

(chuckle turns into cough) ...hooh... (wipes mouth) That would... leave all things to f-fall into entropy... unpredictability... chaos. How any and every thing appears and dictates itself, let alone its laws, are all up to however existence had converged and morphed without myself to maintain it... (Notices James' face, quickly stammers) B-But don't see that as just an undesirable outcome! Chaos isn't complete terror... it is simply the result of unpredictability... it could either be as grand and perplexing existence currently is, surpassing the epitomes of what all things currently lie, or... conclude as expressionless as we were once! Think of it as... leaving it all to chance.

JAMES

...Would I remain dead if I refused?

T'NULIV

Every choice is a sacrifice, James.

JAMES

...(silent, leg bouncing)

T'NULIV

(stands up) ...Take your time... for I don't have any left. (coughs heavier) ...Hm... r-right on queue...

JAMES

(stands up) A-Are you alright?

T'NULIV

Unfortunately not, yet... (smiles) ...I-I think I'll be... better, soon... whether you accept my existence, or... if existence accepts your choice... whatever the result, I-It would all be a glorious spectacle. (gestures towards the table, as a piece of paper and pen manifests) ...Look not at me for a moment... and focus on the table.

JAMES

...Is that... a contract?

T'NULIV

Y-you specialized in paper, yes? In creating something so similar to you and I...? (clutches its side) ...To be more specific, this is the... v-very first piece of paper that had been printed under your management... when all things were said and done, it ended up in the hands of a- (coughs) A-a little girl from Portugal... she had used it to scribble a seemingly insignificant artistic expression of her parents, before it was discarded, and incinerated, becoming an... incomprehensible mass of carbon... (coughs heavier) ...I believed it would symbolize a new beginning if chosen... (chuckles) ...T-the pen, however... is nothing special.

JAMES

...Is that... my way of accepting your offer?

T'NULIV

Y-you don't even have to write your name... just... any scribble, sketch, or word would be enough... a-as long as ink touches that canvas... then you will inherit everything of what I... (trails off) ...Was.

JAMES

(silent, until he picks the pen and paper up) ...And... how would I refuse?

T'NULIV

...Just... walk back through the doorway you came... no need to overthink it... (chuckles) ...Yet, for me... every possible thought is circling within my consciousness! I-I couldn't help but overthink it! I created this body to speak with you, but... my heart is beating so fast... it's... (laughs then coughs) ...I-I'm... feeling... death... and it's... a wonderfully terrifying elation... (smiles lightly at JAMES, before turning to the adjacent doorway) ...I best... be going... please... take a-all the time that you would give the world... and make your right choice.

JAMES

(takes a breath) ...T'nuliv?

T'NULIV

(turns back to JAMES) ...Hm?

JAMES

Just... I-if I accept your... offer, do you... think that I'd be as... grand as you?

T'NULIV

(glances at audience, before turning around) ...To me? (walks though the doorway with a smile and a limp) ...y-you'd be the most transfixing color to grace this canvas many call the Tao.

JAMES

(Silent, before picking up the pen and paper)

...

(Looks in audience's direction, but not directly at them, then back at the paper)

...This is my second chance...

(JAMES takes a breath)

...To be colorful... to be...

(JAMES signs the paper)

...Someone.

(JAMES sighs with a smile)

...T'nuliv... right? I'll... I'll be as colorful as I could possibly be... for you.

END OF PLAY

JONAS PRICE, GRADE 12
SEMIFINALIS, BARTER THEATRE'S YOUNG PLAYWRIGHTS FESTIVAL

Thank You

We wish to express our deepest gratitude to the following individuals and organizations for donating their time, talent and treasure in furthering the mission of the Origin Project as we present this year's anthology. Every student receives a copy for his or her home library. All school libraries and public libraries will have a volume available for students and the public to enjoy.

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