



2022
American
Dream
Essay Contest



BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS
OF CENTRAL WYOMING

2022 American Dream Essay Contest

THE “TEN PRINCIPLES TO LIVE BY” AS DESCRIBED IN
JAMES P. OWEN’S BOOK, *COWBOY ETHICS*.

1. **LIVE EACH DAY WITH COURAGE**
2. **TAKE PRIDE IN YOUR WORK**
3. **ALWAYS FINISH WHAT YOU START**
4. **DO WHAT HAS TO BE DONE**
5. **BE TOUGH, BUT FAIR**
6. **WHEN YOU MAKE A PROMISE, KEEP IT**
7. **RIDE FOR THE BRAND**
8. **TALK LESS AND SAY MORE**
9. **REMEMBER THAT SOME THINGS AREN’T FOR SALE**
10. **KNOW WHERE TO DRAW THE LINE**
11. **CREATE YOUR OWN _____**

INTRODUCTION

Sir John Templeton, a pioneer of financial investments and philanthropy, believed there were a defined set of principles that guide one when living a purposeful and joyous existence. In 1987, he established the Laws of Life Essay Contest in Franklin County, Tennessee, based upon these values. He saw the contest as a new approach to self-assessment that would encourage young people to reflect upon their lives – thereby paving a foundation for a brighter future.

Sir John Templeton’s vision spread across the United States and abroad with contests that now take place all over the world. In the mid-90’s the Templeton Foundation, Zimmerman Family Foundation and Larry and Margo Bean established the American Dream Essay Contest in our great state of Wyoming. Ten years later, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Central Wyoming joined the team – helping to facilitate the contest every year.

This year we continue to partner with James P. Owen, author of *Cowboy Ethics*, *Cowboy Values* and *The Try*, as we use these books as a launching point to prompt youth to discover who they are and how they plan to accomplish their dreams. This approach has challenged the youth of Wyoming to reflect and describe how one of the “Ten Principles to Live By,” or their own personal ethical belief, has been a driving or guiding force in their life. Whether a part of their internal guidance from within, the decisions they make every day, or how they inspire the decisions they make for the benefit of their future.

This booklet contains the 2022 first place winning essays from each participating high school. The Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Wyoming is honored to be part of such an amazing and inspiring opportunity as this competition has become a great tradition for our state.

IN APPRECIATION

The Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Wyoming, who has implemented and hosted this event would like to extend our appreciation and gratitude to the major underwriters who have helped make this year’s American Dream Essay Contest a success.

Thank you, and congratulations to the high school students who have dedicated their time and hearts into writing such powerful essays, and to the teachers and sponsors who organized the local contests for their pupils.

Thank you to the state and local judges who donated the time to diligently read each essay and for the difficult task of selecting our finalists. We appreciate the significant job you did this year.

Finally, thank you to James P. Owen and his team for allowing our Wyoming youth the opportunity to evaluate their own values and apply Cowboy Ethics into their personal lives and stories.

Thank you to everyone who devoted their time and effort toward providing this amazing opportunity!

CONGRATULATIONS

STATE WINNERS

1ST PLACE

\$5,000

DeEtte Hofmann
Worland High School
Sponsor: Stephanie Anderson

2ND PLACE

\$3,000

Keenan Morgan
Roosevelt High School
Sponsor: Don Maggi

3RD PLACE

\$2,000

Arielle Coleman
Kelly Walsh High School
Sponsor: Jill Thompson

HONORABLE MENTIONS

\$1,000

Allison Bromley
Encampment High School
Sponsor: Leslie McLinskey

Skylar Messick
Wyoming Girls School
Sponsor: Jenny Mutch

CONGRATULATIONS

LOCAL WINNERS

Luz Alonso

Natrona County High School
Sponsor: Becky Sondag

Arielle Coleman

Kelly Walsh High School
Sponsor: Jill Thompson

Brayden LaPointe

Glenrock High School
Sponsor: Julia Turner

Lauren Bergstreser

Buffalo High School
Sponsor: Karen Blaney

Kai Fody

Lingle-Fort Laramie High School
Sponsor: John Watson

Karina Lea

Hot Springs County High School
Sponsor: Elizabeth Mertz

Allison Bromley

Encampment High School
Sponsor: Leslie McLinskey

Ceyda Gunduz

Expedition Academy High School
Sponsor: Amanda Santhuff

Avery Lewis

Riverside High School
Sponsor: Travis Rapp

Vidale C'Bearing

Wyoming Indian High School
Sponsor: Margaret Abrams n

Brianna Hansel

Douglas High School
Sponsor: Robyn Wilkinson

Skylar Messick

Wyoming Girls School
Sponsor: Jenny Mutch

Jaden Campbell

Wyoming Virtual Academy
Sponsor: Rita Haussman

Jorie Hess

Dubois High School
Sponsor: Jennifer Bowles

Kamryn Michelena

Arvada-Clearmont High School
Sponsor: Betsy Mack

Joey Chatwin

Burlington High School
Sponsor: Gerald George

Lily Hitchcock

Lander Valley High School
Sponsor: Stacey Stanbury

Keenan Morgan

Roosevelt High School
Sponsor: Don Maggi

Thaddaeus Christensen

C.H.I.L.D. Home School
Sponsor: Colette Christensen

DeEtte Hofmann

Worland High School
Sponsor: Stephanie Anderson

Edwin Soriano

Thunder Basin High School
Sponsor: Deneen Redd

Gracie Keizer

Keizer Home School
Sponsor: Kristy Keizer



1st place

CHOICES AND CONSEQUENCES

By DeEtte Hofmann
Worland High School

Every day, we make choices. Big ones, like where to go to college and who to marry, and the small, seemingly insignificant choices we make everyday. As my alarm rang, these thoughts ran through my mind as I rolled out of bed and headed to my closet to choose what to wear for the day.

I pick up an old swim shirt that I've had since seventh grade. I hug the shirt to my chest as a lump begins to swell in my throat. Will it always hurt this much?

Swimming with the USA program has blessed my life in many ways but mainly by the fact that I met my best friends there. One who changed my life in more ways than one is Clint. Our friendship started at the pool during long practices. We spent countless weekends together at swim meets, playing games as we waited for our events to roll around. Clint had a gift for swimming, and his ambition inspired me to work hard.

Holding the shirt to my face, willing myself not to cry, I carefully folded the shirt and placed it in my duffle bag.

While I'm rummaging through my drawers, I run across a tattered, well-loved three quarter sleeved t-shirt. I wore this shirt all the time during my sixth-grade year. Sixth grade was the year my friend group began to develop. Four of us would sit together in language arts and became fast friends. When we had free time, we would play scrabble. One of my favorite memories happened my sophomore year. The four of us watched a movie at Clint's house and played scrabble—just like old times. Clint was the smartest person in our grade, so of course, he beat us all. I gently put the shirt back in my drawer.

I smother a laugh when I pick up a pair of socks that have avocados wearing sunglasses. These socks always remind me of Clint. He loved to wear outrageously random socks. For such a quiet person, his sense of style was just the opposite. He wore bright, beach-style shirts. Neon green vans were another staple in his closet. His laugh is grafted into the melody of my life, and his smile swims in my memory.

I catch a runaway tear and wipe it off as I grab a pair of gray sweats—my memory flashes to Tuesday, June 22nd, 2021. I was watching TV when Jack texted to see if I'd heard from Clint recently. He'd been missing for hours. This was entirely out of character for Clint.

I tried to sleep, but the fear of the unknown left me paralyzed. I struggled to keep my mind off of Clint, but after a restless night, I finally got up around 6:30 AM. I texted my friend Jack with ideas of where we could look for him. I spent almost an hour of nervous anticipation waiting for a response. My pulse quickened when I looked at my phone and saw my friend calling.

“Hey, any news?” I ask.

“Nobody's told you?”

“Told me what?”

There was silence on the line, which stretched on uncomfortably. I heard him take a hard swallow, before he finally replied, “He shot himself last night,” he paused, “They found him early this morning.”

I never responded to those earth-shattering words. I just sat down and sobbed. I sobbed in sorrow, in anger, and regret.

In less than an hour, my friend Ella had picked me up to meet up with the gang. We all sat on the back porch of Jack's house. It's impossible to put into words exactly what we were feeling, but it was like having the ground ripped out from under you and having no choice but to fall.

It was a humbling experience to watch these boys call others; they struggled to find the right words to give the bad news. They had matured ten years overnight—their innocence ripped away like a bandaid. Hearing the broken sobs of these teenage boys caused me more pain than I thought possible.

I left, still in the sweats and t-shirt I had slept in, and drove to his parent's house. I knocked on the door. When his mom opened, I just hugged her and cried for hours. I finally left their home, and desperate to keep busy, I went to work.

With shaking hands, I continue to dig through my drawers, stopping on a swimsuit. The day I got the news about Clint, I was supposed to go to a neighboring town to swim. The highway to the pool was the same drive that Clint had taken less than 24 hours before. My mind races when I drive that lonely highway. What was he thinking about? Had he made up his mind already? Did he realize how his death would affect people? This wasn't fair. I just wanted my friend back. I tuck the swimsuit into my duffle bag.

As I processed the initial shock that day, other emotions ground their way to the surface. I struggled to make sense of these conflicting emotions. Hoping to gain some clarity, I went to my friend Wyatt's house.

I sat on the couch and cried to Wyatt's dad, “I don't understand why he would do this. He was the smartest person I knew. How could he be so stupid?” my voice got caught in my throat, and I choked down another sob, “We would've

been there for him. All he had to do was say something.”

“It's going to be a long time before you feel okay again. You'll never know what he was thinking, so you have to find a way to get closure without knowing why. I can't tell you that everything will be okay, but just hold on.”

A million thoughts swam through my head, but I was in no state to respond. So I just buried my head into his shoulder and cried.

Suicide is tough because no one is sure what to think and feel. On the one hand, I'm broken-hearted, and on the other, I'm furious with Clint because he's the reason for these feelings.

They say that comparison is the thief of joy, but I have learned that it is also the thief of healing. On days that I felt the worst, I would get caught in the bitter cycle of comparing my pain to others.

“It doesn't make sense for me to be this sad because his parents are reminded of his absence every day in their empty house.”

“You're not nearly as hurt as the boys who were closest to him. Stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

These are the kinds of things I would tell myself. I had to learn to allow myself to be sad without feeling guilty. This tug of war of emotion still pulls me under water sometimes.

One of the phases of grief is denial, and I certainly went through this. I could wrap my mind around the fact that my friend was dead, but I just couldn't accept that he had been so selfish. As the days went on, I began to feel like a detective,

looking for clues that would exonerate my friend of his own murder. But eventually, I accepted the obvious conclusion.

I turn my attention to a light green summer dress. Days passed after Clint's death, although I couldn't tell you if they went fast or slow. Time seemed warped for the first couple of weeks. Some friends and family met for a bonfire to remember him. We sat around and sipped soda as we remembered our friend. Everyone was asked to write down memories in a book to give to his parents. What does one say about a boy who was so smart and so talented with so much potential?

Too soon, his funeral rolled around, and everyone agreed to wear green—his favorite color. I wore my light green summer dress and sat through the heart-breaking ceremony. Contrary to my own expectations, I hardly cried at all. None of us really did. At that point, I had cried so many tears that I don't think my body could have afforded to lose another drop.

I needed life to go back to normal after the funeral. Jack drove me home from work one day, and I told him that I hadn't cried since yesterday afternoon—a new record.

He managed to smile at me and said, “Same, I did quite well today,” in a poor attempt at a British accent. I smiled, though the gesture felt foreign to my face. But smiles came easier as the time passed. I even managed to start laughing again.

I hang up the dress and grab a pair of shorts and my favorite tank top. I lived in this combination over our last summer. To combat

the boredom of long summer days, we got a group together and started to play ultimate frisbee. Looking back, I took these nights for granted. It was on Saturday night frisbee that I saw CJ for the last time. We all stopped playing after that. It just wouldn't feel right without him. Over Thanksgiving, my uncle invited me to play frisbee with some of my cousins and kids in the neighborhood. I agreed and was having fun until I had the frisbee in my hands and looked for CJ in the backfield. Sometimes I just forget that he's gone, and then the pain starts pushing through a door I thought I had locked.

There's a misconception that grief is the weeks after a traumatic event spent crying and adjusting. But that is only the obvious part of grief. Grief is buying Toblerone and realizing he wouldn't be there to share our favorite candy bar with me. Grief is not sleeping for months because your mind is too busy wondering about things you'll never get the answer to. Grief is walking into the pool and catching a glimpse of someone who looks like your friend. Grief is seeing his name on the record board and wondering what records he would've broken if he was still here. Grief is the everyday reminders of his absence that show up when least expected. It's hurt feelings that rise and fall like the tide coming in and out.

Often in life, we are taken by surprise by uncontrollable circumstances. The storm of emotion and shock seems like it will last forever, and in some ways, it does. Even when others forget and move on, the pain is still there; perhaps it would feel wrong if it wasn't. Maybe grief is the price we

pay for opening our hearts to love. After an experience like this, it's easy to lock your heart away and swear to never let anyone get close to you again. It takes courage to allow people back into your life, when you intimately know the pain of loss. But choosing love, day after day, is what gives our lives meaning and direction.

As weeks pass and the seasons change, his memory remains. But it gets easier to remember the good times and smile instead of cry. It's easier to appreciate the memories without feeling like I got cheated out of thousands more. I can get through the day without my emotions changing like a girl changing clothes. Every day holds a new volley of challenges to overcome, and sometimes it takes everything in me just to get out of bed and try again. I have chosen to live each day with courage. I dive into each new day with a deliberate focus on loving those around me—even if it hurts.

I finally settle on a green shirt and dark wash jeans. As I look at myself in the mirror, I brace myself for another day and take the first step out of the house and into the world.



For each of us, the way of life is defined by our daily experiences, stories of our past, and dreams of our future. As individuals, we approach life from a singular perspective, forever grounded in our physical inability to truly live the life of someone else. While our experiences may sometimes overlap, our perspectives rarely do. In the rarity that it does, our perspectives still remain uniquely ours, influenced by our beliefs and past experiences that shape us into the different molds we present to the world. Our interpretations of each other, and of ourselves, rest on these aspects of our past, constantly guiding us along a path determined by our actions. It is perspective that underlines every action we take, word we say, and belief we hold. Belief in our own success requires a perspective that sees our lives as constantly evolving, and that we have the power to alter that evolution. Every hero and villain in history lived a life driven by their own life's perspective, sometimes blocking their ability to recognize and understand one another. Our quarrels and conflicts

2nd place

THE GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE: WHAT IT MEANS AND WHY IT MATTERS

By Keenan Morgan
Roosevelt High School

stem from this basic level of misunderstanding. A simple lack of acknowledgement or refusal to understand can lead us to commit the worst of human acts. Our decisions to be honest or dishonest; kind or unkind; fair or unfair; courageous or non-courageous; lies fundamentally on the willingness of each of us to consider how our personal perspective relates to that of everyone else. Perspective tells us how we fit in the larger puzzle and how we help to complete its picture. Perspective, more than anything else, guides our everyday lives. For this reason, it has been absolutely essential for me to adopt a perspective of living that encompasses everyone's experience, not just my own.

To have a global perspective means more than simply to "put yourself in someone else's shoes," because almost anyone can empathize and move on. But rather, having a global perspective refers to making a consistent effort to understand every person's unique experience and to recognize the importance of one's experience as to how it affects their personal life decisions and choices. It means to deliver a basic level of universal respect to all people, regardless of status or background, by recognizing how their perspective differs from our

own. It emphasizes the importance of our individual human dignity by assigning a responsibility not just to listen, but to truly understand, and to use that understanding to resolve our problems. Having a global perspective means that for all the issues that befall us as singular people, we must always recognize that much of life is bigger than any one person. It also means that sometimes we must set aside our human perspective and examine the larger picture in its entirety. To adopt a global perspective and all of its aspects is to assume the most important responsibility we have towards each other as people: to uphold our common humanity.

James P. Owen's book, *Cowboy Ethics*, describes the "Ten Principles to Live By," a series of ethical beliefs from the "Cowboy Code." These beliefs are important factors in living a happy, coherent, successful, and healthy life. The most important of these principles relates to our personal relationship with the world around us and how the consequences of our actions directly affect our future. To live each day with courage means to face our fears with strength and determination. Attitude matters. To keep promises and always finish what you start means to respect and

honor your responsibility to others and to yourself. Commitment matters. To remember that certain things are not for sale and to know where to draw the line means that core principles should not be unjustly compromised. Values matter. Attitude, commitment, and values highlight the correlation between our actions and our future.

As they say, life is what you make it, and this is the message of the Ten Principles. While I agree with this message, I think a factor that determines the course, and purpose, of our lives is missing. Life is not just what you make it or simply the result of material gain and real world actions. Life, more importantly, *is how you see it*. I could make billions of dollars, but it does not guarantee me happiness, health, or coherence. I could be the most powerful politician, but it does not grant me real success and true respect. If I do not see my life as worth it, I will not believe that my actions or attitude should reflect that worth. Conversely, if I see my actions as consequential to my future, I can then build a life that has true worth. Perspective matters more than any material gain, as it provides the meaning for what is otherwise meaningless. Perspective, or life as you see it, ties everything material with everything imagined, and provides background to things previously unknown. It truly is the ultimate self-fulfilling prophecy, therefore, the most fundamental piece of ethics to consider.

The global perspective encompasses all people, separating us from our sometimes inflated sense of self-importance. It is similar to the Cosmic Perspective outlined by Carl Sagan in his 1994 book *Pale*

Blue Dot, in which he reflects on the true smallness of our lives in the vastness of space, referencing a 1990 photograph where Earth is seen as a tiny point of pale light from the outer reaches of the Solar System. He said, “Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light... To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we’ve ever known.” A global perspective directly accepts this responsibility while keeping it grounded here on Earth. Living this principle has benefited my life in every way. Whether affecting my decision-making process, interpretations of my past, dreams for my future, or my relationship with any other facet of life, I have learned to accept this responsibility and recognize its importance in everyday life.

For much of my life, I have struggled with a sense of belonging. As a young child with a light brown skin complexion, I sometimes questioned where I belonged and where I had come from. I have a White mother with European ancestry, but my father’s side is more complicated. Once believing I was part Mexican due to my adoptive father’s heritage, I promptly acquired, and oftentimes promoted, my “Mexican” label. Upon learning that my adoptive father was not my biological father, I was once again thrown into limbo. I believe my biological father may be African-American but, absent a DNA test or any personal relationship, I cannot be certain. I have been asked if I

am of Native American descent, and have been lumped into the childish onslaught of racial jokes frequently endured by Black and Brown Americans. Other aspects of my life have also caused me to question my belonging, and frequent misunderstandings surrounding these aspects of my identity had led me to wonder why I felt so lost. It is primarily this racial tension and search for answers, however, that introduced me to the central question driving my dissonance.

Why do people discriminate? It was so easy to understand that people did discriminate. I learned of several instances throughout history where the ostracisation and dehumanization of minority groups led to movements for justice and equality. Like those who had come before me, I connected the trends of the past to the present, recognizing how the thread of discrimination is intricately woven into our society, passed down through generations by way of prejudice and misunderstanding. Still, I continued to wonder why anyone would discriminate in the first place. Why would anyone perpetuate it, and why did I, and others, have to endure its effects in the 21st century? Obviously people are taught discriminatory ideas, but this self-evident fact did not truly answer the “why?” Eventually, I realized the fundamental answer is very simple. People simply lack a global perspective that would allow them to recognize and understand the importance of another’s perspective and experience. In the end, it really is that simple. Discrimination and prejudice stems from the stubbornness and failure of people to either recognize or

understand another’s perspective. American enslavement, the Holocaust, Jim Crow Laws, and many other forms of institutionalized persecution were justified by refusing to recognize the dignity and perspective of oppressed people, even if the perpetrators completely understood the gravity of their actions. After realizing this, I took a magnifying glass to several aspects of my life and searched for how a global perspective could apply.

Somewhat to my surprise, it applied everywhere. Arguments could have been avoided. Situations could have been resolved. People could have been successful. Relationships could have been salvaged. Belonging could be discovered. I examined all the aspects of my life that could have been different had I, or others, simply made a genuine productive effort to recognize and understand each other’s perspective, delivering to each other the same basic level of human respect all people deserve. The importance of a global perspective seemed so obvious yet, glaringly lacking among many people. I realized then just how much it mattered to me and how beneficial it could be to my everyday life.

Deciding to adopt a global mindset, I have made more of a consistent effort to understand other people. Like opening the blinds on a sunny day, everything lit up with unmistakable clarity. I learned people’s stories and their actions made sense. Their attitudes became more obvious, and I truly understood that every person has a story and perspective entirely unique to them. I began to feel more comfortable with my place

in society, as I knew that prejudice was simply a lack of perspective. I knew that if life is what I make it, it is also how I see it. Why would I choose to see it as miserable when I can choose to see it as a journey that, as difficult as it can be, eventually leads to something better? For meaning to exist in my material accomplishments, I had to personally bestow it. I had to reassess my personal values and apply them accordingly. By living with a global perspective, I felt more calm and driven towards my goals. I felt freer simply knowing that I am a small piece of a big puzzle and that I am in control of my own destiny. My belonging was mostly up to my interpretation. To treat all people with dignity and respect has been a grounding principle value – one that is both satisfying and fulfilling. I felt more peace knowing that for most reasonable people to understand where I am coming from, all they need is an understanding of my perspective and experience, something I’ve learned is much easier to achieve when affording the same right to them.

Adopting this perspective has been transformative, enlightening, and gratifying. I stress its importance as a solution to many of the needless conflicts we may find ourselves in, but also acknowledge the difficulty in consistently living up to it. Like any other belief or value, it is a habit that must be built. Like any other habit, it is difficult in the beginning but gets easier over time. Just like the Ten Principles listed by James P. Owen in *Cowboy Ethics*, there will be times when it will feel easier and more satisfying to toss out the ethical rulebook. People will challenge

the strength of a global perspective and test the durability of its power, pushing it to the brink of fracture. Just as any viable ethical belief, however, the requirement to withstand pressure is essential to its classification as a belief to live by. I can attest to the fact that the global perspective passes the stress test with flying colors. Perspective, as the fundamental basis for a happy, healthy, successful, and coherent life, serves to benefit all who employ it on a global scale. To recognize the world as larger than ourselves is to simultaneously recognize the importance of our place in it. Our actions have consequences, and our perspective designates meaning and appreciation for what truly matters. Life is bigger than any one of us, we just have to realize it.



3rd place

COURAGEOUS STEPPING STONES

By Arielle Coleman
Kelly Walsh High School

One year can completely change a life; it did for my fifteen-year-old self. It's South Korea, January 20th, 2021: the alarm screeches at four a.m., telling me it is going to be a long, long day. I trudge out of bed and get dressed.

I dread facing my father who I have been fighting with over going to public school. He denied me access to public schooling, but has lately even been refusing me access to my homeschooling. My mom continuously sides with my father, taking her anger out on me for our family's problems. I have three siblings, ages eleven, nine, and five, who I have been parenting for the last few years. With a strong sense of guilt toward my siblings- I muster a note telling them how much I love them, and how I will always be there for them.

All my life I had been quite frequently moved and homeschooled. My life was so sheltered, I truly believed I was living a normal, healthy life. My father finally relented to my constant requests to go to school when I was in eighth grade with

a compromise of letting me join cross country running. It was then a little window into another life opened. I saw it was possible to have friends, to not have a life solely revolving around being my siblings' caretaker. It was then I pleaded with my parents to enroll me in public school. At that point in my life, I had only received approximately three years of formal schooling, grades second through fourth. Throughout eighth, ninth, and tenth grade, they would enroll me full time, then disenroll, then reenroll. Education was always something they took away from me as a punishment for not complying with their views. Sometimes they took my education away on a whim and never gave me an explanation. It was an endless repeating cycle that lasted through January 20th, 2021.

I knew being isolated, sheltered, and lacking a proper education was wrong. Fighting for an education was my only way out- not just of being my siblings' mother-figure all day-, but also from the cage that kept me from understanding the world around me and having a chance at creating a future for myself. I had met peers while in and out of school, and they were able to form real connections. They were not restricted from learning or forced to be a parent as a teenager. My whole sense of reality was cracked: I ultimately had to make

the decision to fight for what was right, even if it was the more challenging road to pursue.

Since my parents did not want to budge on their expectations and idea of a proper "education," they deemed it necessary that I move to America to prove the point that I couldn't live on my own without them. They made it clear if I did not board the plane, there would be serious consequences. My thoughts are restlessly persistent. Where am I going to end up? Is this move permanent? When will I get to see my siblings again? What is going to happen to me? All I know is my maternal grandparents said they would be able to take me in for a while, and they live in Boston, so that is where I am headed.

I am extremely car sick on the way to the airport, from a vast combination of nerves, anxiety, and a natural inclination for queasiness. I have so many tight knots in my stomach because I am scared; I don't know my grandparents well. Indeed, I have heard a bounty of stories concerning the conflict my parents have had with them, but I never had the chance to make an opinion of them for myself. I do know I probably cannot stay with them forever because my uncle's family also lives with them in a tiny condo on a dangerous street. My sense of safety and security is shattered; I am feeling panicky.

I get out of the car and slowly wheel my luggage into the airport. There are tiny tears streaming down my face. The whole morning is an absolute blur. I get my boarding pass somehow, make my way to security, and give a brief awkward goodbye to my parents. My father seems to be at odds with himself and attempts to show some compassion for me that morning. He even tells my mom to be less icy toward me when we are in the airport. My mom barely hugs me before I go through security and proceeds to look at me angrily before I leave and says, "Well, you got what you wanted." She clearly does not understand the severity of the situation and how painful it is to sacrifice my siblings and sense of security for an education at my age.

Somehow I am now in line for the desk with the person stamping the passports. I am in denial of what is happening. People are staring at me in the line, and with a quick glance in some glass, I realize my eyes are swollen and red from tears. I tug my sleeve and quickly pat my eyes. It is my turn to get my passport stamped. The lady smiles at me and asks for my Korean identification card. The smile disappears as I search my wallet, and she realizes I do not have it.

"If you want to come back to Korea, it will be best if you find that card," she informs me. I ponder that and give her a quick nod to show I understand. Yet, at this moment in time, I cannot help but think about why I would ever come back. Nothing seems to be a big deal to me anymore. I do not have the energy to spend worrying about this. I am fifteen, flying solo across the ocean for a duration of

sixteen hours.

My grandparents' condo is tiny. During my stay I sleep in a loft with my ten-year-old cousin, right above my grandparents' room. My grandparents' first language is Vietnamese, so we have difficulty communicating. I am feeling frustrated with the language barrier and inability to have proper, deep conversations with them. I tell myself I am out of place; I am intruding on other people's lives. There are times I am miserably homesick, especially since my parents barely communicate with me. Am I all alone in this world? It most surely feels that way.

I cannot even walk on my grandparents' street without drugged and deranged men following me. Some time later, my cousin and I are walking to a coffee shop, and three men yelling derogatory remarks blatantly start coming toward me and my ten-year-old cousin. Instinctively, I grab her hand and give her a sober look without saying anything. She understands, and we both bolt to the condo. I proceed to immediately flip the lock. I look out the windows and several nights policemen are at the same house while others repeatedly patrol up and down the street. It makes me feel I could be next; I could be in trouble. I cannot walk outside this house without the risk of getting hurt. It is then I choose to never look back; it was clear to me this housing situation was not going to be a permanent solution.

About two and a half weeks into my stay in Boston, I receive a long text from my paternal aunt who happens to live in Casper, Wyoming. She says she's heard

about my living situation and she and her husband want to offer me the opportunity to come live with them. My first thought is, Why on earth is this happening? They have five girls under the age of eight, and I have only met their family a couple times in my life. It is almost like a dream, giving me this perfect opportunity to get out of a bad situation. I feel like this is right even though I have no idea what I am getting myself into, let alone it all happening so very fast. This strong aching feeling creeps in saying, You need to be brave. You need to be courageous. You need to go to Casper.

A week later, with bags packed once again, I board my flight to Wyoming. Although I am nervous, I head to Casper with a strange sense of, This is what you are supposed to do. I just know this is going to be a good place for me, even though I have absolutely no idea what the state is like. During my time in Casper, I make wonderful friends, connections, and gain a deep appreciation for the mountain. I am able to look at the world for myself and start to rework faulty perceptions. My aunt allows me to work on my homeschool online classes, so I feel like I'm taking a step forward. My aunt notices how my anxiety is my main emotion. She helps me by pushing me out of my comfort zone: paddleboarding, rock climbing, and swimming in the lake. Letting small successes decrease my mistrust in myself and others. Most importantly, she listens. She validates my experiences. She assures me I am going to overcome my past and live a meaningful life.

I live with my aunt for about five

months before instability erupts once again. My aunt takes me out for a night walk on the river. The sun is going down, a chill is in the air as per usual, and we are strolling along the path. She relays her husband got into a PhD program in Arkansas, and they would be moving. My aunt tells me she will find a place for me to stay so I can remain in Casper, because there is not going to be room for me to stay with them. The feelings of uncertainty and fearfulness creep back into my mind. My sense of belonging dissolves. My life feels like a rollercoaster, up, down, up, down. I never know where I am going to live; I never know what is going to happen to me. This all works out, though, since my aunt's sister-in-law and her husband open up their home to me. Finally, I will be allowed to go to a public high school with wonderful teachers and opportunities. It feels right. This is the moment I have been fighting for, so I take them up on their extremely generous offer.

Here I am in Casper, Wyoming, exactly one year after leaving South Korea, writing my story. I have flown across the ocean and lived at three different homes within a span of six months. I have been in a public school uninterrupted for one semester. Reflecting on all the steps that have brought me here, my life is barely recognizable. I joined a debate team whilst knowing my educational gaps would make this a more difficult endeavor compared to others. I have also joined DECA and was elected as one of the state officers for the 2022-2023 school year. I hold myself to a standard of honors classes because I realize how important education is. I will

not let fear of an insurmountable challenge stop me. I am an opinionated person because I am now allowed to have opinions. I live each day with courage. There is still instability and fear in my life that I work daily to overcome, and I am determined to create a safe place for my siblings to land when needed. In the future, I plan on becoming a lawyer so I can help others successfully fight their battles, so they, too, can use courage to overcome their hardships.



Running. Not running for fun. Not running for a sport. I was never a runner or a track star. Running because I was petrified. As my face hit the ground, I experienced 50,000 volts of electricity hitting my leg from a taser. I bore a wave of nausea, guilt, and fear. I heard all the police officers quickly approaching behind me, ultimately catching the girl who'd been on the run. All I could feel at that moment was how ice-cold my fingers, legs, and chest felt. I thought I was never going to be able to get up. Maybe it was the taser that made me feel that way, or maybe it was the terror surging through my blood. Little did I know, this would be the start of my resurrection. The moment I started rising from the ashes into a magnificent bird. The change in my ethical beliefs, the realization that I needed to start knowing where to draw the line.

I was raised in a suburban neighborhood with white picket fences and good-hearted neighbors who would lend you some sugar if you run out. I had a really uncomplicated life for a really long time. I never had to worry

Honorable Mention

THE ONCE FROZEN PHOENIX

By Skylar Messick

Wyoming Girls School

about the Department of Family Services taking me away or my parents telling me I didn't have enough money for something I wanted. I always earned the best grades and participated in sports like gymnastics and swimming. I competed at State two different times for swimming and always had support from my entire family, including distant cousins, uncles, and a bunch of old people I'd never met in my life. Life was astounding for a long time until it just wasn't anymore. Pinpointing what went wrong is part of my daily efforts to strive to better myself. I don't think you can always place the blame on just one thing. Maybe it was the drug abuse when I turned 12. Maybe it was the crazy boyfriend who ended up in the Rawlins Penitentiary. Maybe it was the abortion that I had to get because the same boyfriend tried to trap me in a toxic relationship. Perhaps it was the falling out with my dad, after being a "daddy's girl" for so long, or the suicide attempts that made everyone in my life scared to leave me alone. When you grow up being an A+ student who achieved everything in life and was never in trouble, it seems kind of weird to end up with ten-plus criminal charges to your name and in a residential facility for adjudicated delinquent girls.

What does this all have to do with knowing where and when

to draw the line? A disobedient girl who had a good life, who had everything she needed, suddenly became part of a statistic. Someone that other kids and adults will look at and say, "I sure hope I never turn out like that," or "I pray that won't be my child." I used to unquestionably think I would never be that one in four, according to the Juvenile Justice Statistic, who was labeled as a "delinquent." Nonetheless, I did end up being that statistic. I had to sit back and think about what I'd done wrong. I used to think that I knew where I was drawing the line, doing what I wanted to do just because I told myself that it was acceptable. Now, in my mind, I know that's not the case and to draw the line in the right places, I have to learn the difference between good and bad. I have to observe the allowable boundaries of society.

During my rebellion against the world and choosing to do what I justified to be right, I ended up in a relationship with a kid who was known in my town to be a mischievous rebel. He pumped me full of various amounts and types of drugs throughout the relationship, helping me restart an addiction to coke, pills, and alcohol. He was blond, handsome, and everything a girl thought she wanted. This relationship followed countless attempts to get attention after being rejected by my family

for being a drug addict. For the first two months, I snuck out of my bedroom every night and he would pick me up. After those months, my parents found out and refused to let us see each other. That's when everything went to hell. I refused to listen to my mom and dad and saw him every chance I could get. It went like this for eight months, and at the end of those months, I ran away with him for the final time. I had been with him for a short time before he asked me if we could go to his house to just sleep in his bed since we'd been sleeping in the car. When we got there, I told him I didn't want to do anything, but sleep for a couple of hours and then go back to hiding in his car. He didn't listen to my wants and pressured me into something I never wanted.

It wouldn't be appropriate to explain what happened that night. It's not because I can't go into detail about what happened, trust me it's a vivid memory in my mind. It's the fact that everyone reading this understands or at least acknowledges the difference between enjoying a sexual encounter with someone you love and it being forced onto you because the person you loved manipulated you into doing it. After that night I made sure I was going to get caught with him. I wanted him in trouble. I purposely let myself be seen when I was with him, and that's when I made the choice to run. I wanted to escape from him and the cops. That plan didn't work and I wound up in a group home for five months with the memory of that taser latching itself in my leg.

There was something terribly off about me though. I felt like every

bone in me was aching and my back was caving in on itself from an unknown pressure. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep, and I noticed I was always shaky. I was hit with an unendurable fact when I went to the doctor. I was pregnant from what I thought was the love of my life, assaulting me. I was absolutely shocked and had to make a decision no 16-year-old should have to make. A decision that should never have been sprung upon a girl who was already traumatized. So after that, I went out of state and got a procedure that was earth-shattering. From what I can recall, the floors of those rooms were freezing. I was wearing only my medical gown and could feel the chills rising up to my neck. I remember crying afterward and my tears hitting the cold floor with a silent splash.

If I would've known how to draw the line, that situation would have never happened. I'm not saying I blame myself for my assault, but I do blame myself for not seeing that running away with that kid was harmful to not only me but to everyone else that I actually cared about. After watching my past self go through that, I know that there was never a sturdy and self-preserving line in place that I needed to follow. Nevertheless, this taught me that there are more important things in life than trying to impress a malicious boy. The only people I want to impress now are my beautiful momma and firstly, myself. I've drawn my own line in my life, one that is full of love, loyalty, and a flame that is constantly growing.

Eventually, when I got out of the unremitting visit at the group home, I continued being

disobedient towards my parents and my probation officer. As I was loading up my body with drugs and alcohol, my depression spiked. Towards the end of the year, September 2021, I ended up in the hospital for a failed suicide attempt that left my family and friends heartbroken for a long time. I can't really look back and remember that day, it was a complete blur. All I can remember was the frigidness of the room and the burning sensation from the constant flow of sulfur mixed with saline that was running through my severely dehydrated veins. On that night, again, I didn't know where to draw the line. I thought that if I wasn't alive anymore, I wouldn't have to deal with the horrible thoughts in my head and my constant change in my mood. The idea of suicide seemed a lot better than having to deal with my consequences and the way my life was consistently sliding downhill. Now I realize that if I were dead, I wouldn't have gotten the chance to get better. I wouldn't have been able to see my younger brother graduate, go to prom, and get married. I wouldn't have been able to be sober for more than three months.

As I sit in this facility with girls who still haven't risen from their ash, I see the future I've always subconsciously wanted for myself. I am finally drawing the line on where my ethics are. I've drawn the line that tells me what is right and wrong. I've ultimately drawn the line that tells me I will be sober. The line tells me why I need to be alive. It tells me that I'm the only person who can make my life better. To do this I need to follow the plan I've been drafting, revising, and designing for myself.

This line I've drawn for myself is the one that I won't let anyone cross, and I won't let it get erased or redrawn because I know that this is the line that will get me to finish the race and win the ultimate prize that is integrity, self-knowledge, and self-forgiveness.

I am a Cowboy in Wyoming, and that means just because I was in trouble and I did regrettable things like breaking and entering, assault, numberless accounts of possession, etc.; doesn't mean I can't rebound from my past and make it into something beautiful in the future. My goal is to learn where to draw and place certain lines.

The one thing that I do look back on and remember about all the trauma I went through, is the coldness. I remember how bitter my limbs felt and how my heart and brain suffered from numbness. The hospital and urgent care rooms that felt absolutely piercing, and the sharp bite on my skin that I will never forget. That icy cold nip on my skin is what pushes me to continue to follow the new set of lines I've drawn for myself that I know are reasonable. I never want to have to feel that unsympathetic coldness just because I made an unfavorable decision or was impulsive.

My resurrection came to me as I walked out of those hospital doors and into the doors of a facility that is guiding me to see the lines I needed to create and follow. I became new and whole after I almost died and when I had to face the heartbreaking pain of an abortion. That pain helped me create and draw some beautiful lines. I continue to use those lines to help me accomplish the bigger

picture I've constructed for myself. At the end of the day, the lines I've drawn in the past were rigged and had no flow or pattern. Now, my lines are well structured, neat, and strong enough to push away anyone who dares to cross them. Due to my fear of the coldness from those harmful decisions, I am fighting back with heat and fire. I am now a Phoenix that has risen from the ashes.



The little girl sits on the wooden stairs, not able to see through the waterfalls falling from her eyes. The shouting from below is so loud she can't hear the footsteps behind her. Her brother crouches down beside her, swallowing her in his arms. Even though she can still hear the shurred and explicit words below, she feels safer, more protected. The little girl is powerless, there is nothing she can do, for she is too small and afraid to take on the big bad monster.

We used to lay on the couch in front of a movie, laughing more than watching. We used to be inseparable, I was a daddy's girl.

Honorable Mention

THE STAIRCASE

By Allison Bromley
Encampment High School

There was nothing I wouldn't do for you, but that was before I had an encounter with your monster. The first time I saw your monster was when we were watching tv together. You asked me for the remote and I told you no. That was a mistake I will forever remember, because before I knew it, my face was being shoved into the couch cushion. I tried to resist but your hands, clutching my hair, were too formidable. I tried to call for help, but my screams were silenced by your drunken rage. I started to hyperventilate; I couldn't breath and I didn't think I ever would again. I don't want to know what would have happened had Mom not walked in and stopped you. For days, every time I looked at you I had to choke back tears, but you didn't even remember what had happened. You were able to forget, but that's a memory I will always have. I hoped and prayed that I would never see your monster's

ugly face again.

The girl stands on the wooden stairs, anger in her eyes. She has worked up the courage to start her descent but something in the pit of her stomach screams for her to stop. She looks down at the red marks on her leg. The sound of the belt snapping, cracking against her delicate skin thunders through the room. She jumps, almost slipping and revealing her position on the stairs. It is almost like someone else has taken over her body because one second she is confidently standing on the stairs and the next she is in her bed, blankets flung over her head, silencing her cries for help. Once again, the monster has prevailed.

For a while I could forget about your monster. I could shove my feelings down and try to be a “good daughter”. For a long time I was able to hide my fear behind a mask of normalcy, ignoring everything, hoping that one day the darkness inside you would go away. But it never did.

My breaking point was when I came home to see my brother crying. You had started a fight with him and your drinking buddy ended up almost snapping his neck. My brother could have died and afterwards you weren't even sorry about it; instead, you blamed it on him because you couldn't remember what you did. In your drunken state, you had no regard for me or my siblings; it was all about what you craved and what your monster needed to survive. My heart was shattered. I was cold to you, but you deserved it.

Mom told you that your buddy could never come back. He had

tried to hurt our family and we would not tolerate that, but as soon as she left on a trip, I found myself staring straight into the beast's eyes. Your friend said hi to me but I couldn't muster up the words to say anything. I couldn't believe you would bring a villain like that into our house, let him eat our food, and sleep in our beds. I wanted to make you pay for what you did, I wanted to make him pay. But, once again, I was still too weak to stand up to your monster.

The girl no longer stands and listens from the stairs; she is in the middle of the shouting match, she is a part of it. The monster's voice booms through the house, shaking the pictures on the walls. The girl is done with the unfairness and emotional pain. She finally speaks up, her voice faint at first, but soon she is roaring louder than she ever has. Everyone stops dead in their tracks, shocked at the sudden change in her tone. She has always been shy and quiet, but now she has blossomed into a strong and expressive young woman. The fight starts back up, but this time she's yelling too. She ices over, no warmth in her heart for the monster in front of her eyes. What she sees is not the man that she has called her father for 17 years, it is the darkness that has taken away many good memories and has given her so many bad ones.

I choose to live my life on my terms. I choose to have self control. I choose my family over my addictions, and I choose to live my life with honor and perseverance. I will take responsibility for my actions and I will be the best person I can be. Today I live my life with pride and keep my head held high. I live each day with courage, so

there is no battle I will retreat from, and no monster I cannot slay.



BE AN OAK TREE

By Kamryn Michelena
Arvada-Clearmont High School

Another day. Another comment. And another comment. And another.

“How's the weather up there?”

“Why are you SO tall?”

“Dang, you're tall.”

“What's up, Tree?”

The stares I got from people as I ask for men's size 12 sneakers while shopping at Scheels. The absolute struggle to find a pair of jeans that fit properly. The idea that I can't wear heels because I'm already tall. The awkwardness of having to stand in the back for every picture, and being taller than almost every boy I meet.

These comments and societal ideas and simple actions destroyed the confidence of a young girl, just a sprout, trying to survive and control her skinny, uncoordinated, and lengthy limbs. I had family members telling me to stand up straight and own my height, but at school, I just got torn down for it by my peers. Those close to me were trying to grow oak, but my peers were cutting at the roots. I shot up to my current height, six feet two inches, in 7th grade, and I made a deeper connection to a friend, he hyped me up and when someone was making fun of me for being tall, he shut them down. His friendship built a little fence around the young tree, trying to reach for the sky. He was much shorter than me, and didn't care that I was “freakishly tall”, he thought it was cool and knew that there was more to me as a person than my height. My parents and grandparents had been telling me this for years, but when finally someone my age told me this, that's how I met my best friend. The story of my confidence growing to oak from a stomped on sprout doesn't end there though.

Since 5th grade, I'd been playing volleyball and basketball for my school. I was an uncoordinated and unconfident athlete that was just a sack of skin and bones. In the spring of 7th grade my mom signed me up for my first club volleyball team, excitement and nervousness raged through me as I walked into the first practice. I was taller than the rest of the girls on my team and most, if not all, of the older girls. I started watching pro and college games on YouTube, watching how these tall female athletes carried themselves, how they moved on the court, and how they recovered

when they did something wrong. These watching these amazing female athletes gave me someone to look up to and to aspire to. And that small tree inside of me grew just a little more. I watched in awe, hoping someday that I would be in control of my limbs, that I would be fast, that I would be strong, that I would be confident.

Fast forward to the summer before my freshman year of high school, I had gotten stronger over the summer, working out almost every day, grueling workouts in the sun, running sprints up and down the driveway til failure, stretching, and yoga. I watched videos of how top athletes trained physically but I didn't know pushing myself past my physical capabilities was not all that I needed to do. I still wondered, will all my training pay off? Would I get to play any varsity? Turns out it would and I did get to play varsity, heck I got to start, with only one girl on the bench I was thrown into a starting position on varsity. I was still unconfident about my height and I was still pretty skinny, but I was becoming more athletic and now I was a starter. In all honesty, I was terrified the first game out, I was trembling, the gym was almost completely silent as we stepped out. My first year of high school volleyball, with barely any spectators, courtesy of COVID. As we warmed up, I felt my temperature begin to rise I felt like I was blooming, like it was the spring. I began to feel like a committed and serious athlete. I felt alive. I felt strong. I felt confident.

As the season went on my coach watered me with wisdom, and though I had reached my peak

height physically, mentally my trek upwards was just beginning. Coach worked with us on mindset, and I learned confidence wasn't just standing up straight and telling yourself you can. You had to believe you can and that you are enough. She worked with me on loving my height more because I didn't hate it but I also wasn't hyping myself about it, and sometimes I thought it was just getting in my way. Throughout junior high, I would get subbed out when I went back row, or they'd hide me so I wouldn't pass. Coach didn't think that was helping me become a better athlete and she helped me solidify my passing fundamentals. She even got me to begin diving for the ball and getting it up, instead of just crashing to the ground like a rootless tree and missing the ball completely. I was now more confident of what my body could achieve when my mind was out of the way.

Getting my mind out of the way didn't just make me more confident about my height. I stopped being a perfectionist and started being a high-achiever. I stopped worrying about what others were thinking and started worrying about how I felt about myself. I stopped tearing myself down and started building myself up, and making myself strong physically and mentally.

Skip ahead about six months, it was a bright June day, the air smelt of excitement, I could taste it, something good was about to happen. I went to FFA Camp. In all honesty, I didn't know that it would have changed my life so much. Instead of girls tearing down we were all hyping each other up. Guys didn't act like I was a freak of nature and everyone just treated

people like people. I felt like I was in a safe group of peers and even though I only hung out with them for four days I felt welcomed. We talked about body image, being bullied, our friendships, our failure, God, we talked about everything. It helped me to accept myself more. Eventhough all of our lives were different we were able to connect on these things. I started to understand what it meant to live each day with courage. For me it didn't mean puffing out your chest and walking like a bouncer. For me it meant being willing to accept myself. To accept my height. To accept my lack of coordination. To accept my awkwardness. To accept me.

I would like to tell you that this was the end of it. That I never questioned my worth after that or that I was never doubtful of my abilities, but that would be a lie. In September of my sophomore year, still practically starting the school year, my mental courage took a hit. A big one. The girls that had been bullying me since about 4th grade escalated it. They told me that I was unimportant, useless, unable of greatness... they told me I was better off dead. I couldn't even find words to say, I just put my headphones in and tried to drown out that voice they planted in my head. I talked to my ag teacher, she reported it. She made sure I was okay, she texted my mom that night to make sure I was okay at home. I was okay until I tried to sleep but ultimately cried myself to sleep, choking back sobs of inner pain and confusion. I knew God put me on this earth for a reason, and I wasn't going to cut his plan short. "He made me with a purpose, He has bigger plans for me," I repeated

these quietly to myself, for hours that night, making sure I could pull myself together for school the next day. I would not show them how much I hurt. How much those words, words that should not be uttered to any human being, penetrated my brain. How those words were destroying positive and happy thoughts like a parasite. I would not break, but my branches began to bend with the weight of the world.

The roots of the oak had been compromised, all of the things I thought, did, and said now had a critic. A strong and unescapable one nagging at everything about me and the things I loved. Luckily I knew a voice that no nagging could overcome. God's voice. The only voice that could help me out of this confusion. The only way I could reach oak status.

His voice, God's voice, allows me to live each day with courage, no matter the circumstances. This courage allows me to connect with people and to make myself a better person. I now always try to carry myself with confidence, love, faith, and doing so has shown me so many great things. New people, close friends. New thoughts, good ideas. New plans, unfinished stories. My definition now of living each day with courage, living each day in God's glory, and working hard to make myself and those around me better people. No matter how they hurt me I will live courageously and I will forgive them.



DO WHAT HAS TO BE DONE

By Lauren Bergstreser
Buffalo High School

I wasn't always this good at what I do. I wasn't always good at all. There were a thousand times- a million- where I almost gave up. So close to failure that I could taste the sour on my tongue, smell the smoke wafting towards the ceiling. But those moments are not the ones that I allow to define me, I won't let them snake up my body and pin me against a wall. The moments that define me are the ones where I smelled only pride, and the taste was not sour, it was warm and spicy, fizzing on my tongue like something I did right.

I don't let the bad minutes define me, but I don't take them for granted. When you smell the smoke often enough, you become immune to it, or you learn a way to deal with it, or you cover your mouth and nose with a cloth and

keep going anyway. If you smell the smoke often enough, you can learn to keep going even if it slows you down. But if you run away, a scared stray cat, you'll never learn to fight through such a minor inconvenience. If you run away, you will never be able to do the things you truly need to do.

Because, inevitably, the smoke will be back. The sour taste will be back. And what then? You can't run forever. Eventually, you're gonna have to figure out a way to deal with the problems in your life.

...

I give it three seconds. Three seconds, and then I'm gonna eat dirt. I'm fighting so freaking hard to pull Trigger's nose out of the mud, but what can I say? He weighs half a ton, and I'm over here only a little over a hundred pounds, so it's inevitable that he wins this fight. And besides, he's got leverage. Face between his knees and front feet planted solid in the dust, he's throwing his hocks towards the sky, his back feet shooting out straight behind him. His coat is glued flat with sweat, his mouth foaming, mane all wild, and his ears pinned back against his neck. I didn't even use spurs this time. Everyone that's watching is hollerin' all sorts of useless things, and I'm tuning them out. Just me and Trigger, fifteen hundred pounds of bright bay muscle underneath me, fighting me for all he's worth.

When I hit the ground, I can't say I wasn't expecting it. Doesn't mean I don't feel the twinge in my wrists and the white-hot pain in my skull. And it doesn't mean I'm not red-hot-mad and ready to hurt someone. Trigger's outta here, his

tangled tail flying in the wind. He's dragging my brand- new barrel reins across the dry Wyoming grass, my favorite saddle slightly ajar on his back, and his feet barely touching the ground. I'm gonna have to call Abigail to catch him down at her house- that's where he always ends up going anyway.

I'm still laying in the dust and everyone is asking if I'm okay, and physically, I'm pretty sure I am. But inside my mind, there's a whirlwind of thought. I've never given up on a horse before. But I can't say that I'm not very close to letting this one go. Every day, we have this freakin fight. It's not like I haven't eaten dirt before. I mean, this is my lifestyle and I'm no good if I don't have the courage to live it. But Trigger is more stubborn than I am, I think. He's not ready to give up. And honestly, I don't know if he ever will be. I finally get up and brush myself off. My mom has already talked to Abigail and she's got Trigger penned up with her little herd.

It's a long walk down the hill, so I go slowly, ignoring the ache that's coming from my very soul. I kick up dust while I walk, dragging my boots in the dirt like a second-grader. The sun is beating hard on my back when I pass Rocky and Alpachia, the fancy-bred Spanish horses a rich tourist imported when she moved in next door. This thirty-year-old woman has more money than brains and she hasn't touched Rocky or Chia since the truck pulling them showed up. Instead, every month, she bathes me in more dollars than my family has seen at one time just to make sure her animals are fed and watered and set with the proper appointments. I offered her riding

lessons as well, but she seems more interested in describing to everyone from her old neighborhood in NYC how beautiful it is out here and what an excellent lifestyle this one is than actually living it. I don't talk to her and she doesn't talk to me. I make sure Alpachia gets her teeth floated and Rocky gets his special padded shoes, and a check shows up in my mailbox on the second of every month. I personally think they're too pretty to be pasture pets, but it's not my circus, not my monkeys.

Anyway, when I show up, Abigail is in the arena. A familiar cloud of bay attitude is flying around her, circles wide and desperate. Abby's relaxed, flicking the flag in her left hand when he slows and stepping around the circle with composure. He's fighting her hard, but she stays calm and doesn't let him get away with anything. Eventually, she decides his breath is coming hard enough. She drops her right hand and steps firmly toward his back end. He stops abruptly, amber eyes seeking out the next threat, body tensed for another round on the lunge line. Abby drops the rope and flag, smirking at me. I already know what she's going to say, so I sigh and wander over to collect my horse. She's quiet this time, wary of my temper when I'm having a day like this. I thank her and she salutes on her way to deal with her own horse, Scout, who, by the way, is standing quiet on the other side of the arena, resting his back leg, and his lip drooping. He twitches a fly every now and then, but never once did he look up during Trigger's dramatic episode.

I'm tired, but something occurs to me. So is Trigger. He is sweaty and out of breath, staring at me

with a little bit of defeat in his eyes. Normally, I wouldn't do this with him, I hate ending up on the ground twice in one day, but I think that maybe sometimes, what has to be done is unpleasant. I look over at Abby, and she's loping easy circles on Scout. His yellow coat is glinting in the sun, he's going around willingly, and Abby is calm as ever, watching me mount my insane horse from the corner of her eye.

I'm not sure what I expected from him, an instant change, a perfect horse, but it's not what I get. Trigger is tired, too tired to buck even, but that doesn't mean he won't hop. He rounds his back, arches his neck, and picks all four feet off the ground. I sit out the hops, trying to be patient and relaxed like Abigail, and eventually, he stops. I give him a break, asking nothing from him but a place to sit for a second. Then I urge him around again. He hops. I try seven more times and I'm near giving up, but the eighth time, he just stops. He's contemplating, and then he gives. I feel him release the tension in his body. I cue one more time, and he picks up the lope flawlessly. I let him continue around the arena twice before I let him quit on me and then I'm not sure what to feel. Was not giving up on this horse the only trick? Trigger is licking his lips and nodding, letting out short snorts with his breath. I can't believe I did it.

When I get home, leading my no-longer insane horse, everyone else has gone inside, but my mom is on the four-wheeler, dragging a rake through our own arena. When she sees me reach the crest of the hill, she pauses and shuts off the four-

wheeler. She walks to me, smiling.

"Abby's mom called." She pats Trigger's neck and gently takes the reins from me, leading him slowly towards the tack room. "I knew you had it in you, honey. This life is tricky and this horse was trickier, but we got 'im for you for this exact reason. You broke the fight in this horse in exactly the right way, you just needed a little inspiration to do what had to be done."

...

My mom was right that day. There's something in our DNA out here in the west that makes it clear. Eventually, we will do what has to be done. Eventually, we will put in the work we need to make it happen. If that wasn't true, who would we even be?



SUNSHINE AND SHADOWS

By Joey Chatwin
Burlington High School

My mom says that everyone has to deal with something. My dad says I will have to quit sports if it gets worse. In technical terms, it is a problem with the brain causing one to have negative thoughts. I define it as a shadow that will always be there, through the good and the bad. The shadow is always there but so is the light, and I have to choose between them. Mental battles are something that happens in many people's lives. Some people let the shadow consume them, while others only allow sunshine. These battles are so often private and fought within, so others aren't even aware. It didn't always have an effect on me, it wasn't always a battle to decide sunshine or shadows, but every day I have to face it with courage.

I was 11 when I noticed the panic

attacks starting to happen. At first, I didn't know what they were. There was a constant worry and a need for perfection. Just a year before that, my dad got remarried. Every marriage has its ups and downs; their downs started almost immediately. Constant arguing and threatening divorce, I was scared to go to their house. I was always worried that I would do something wrong, even by accident. My anxiety caused me to be nervous most of the time, leading to me being paranoid and struggling to sleep at night. I would freak out about the littlest things, always requiring everything to be perfect. When I had a panic attack, I couldn't breathe; it felt like I was in an endless battle. Who was going to win, my shadows or my light? At night, I couldn't sleep, I would struggle to shut my mind off. There were some nights that I would get so paranoid, I couldn't move. I would be paralyzed with fear, scared to make any noise. I wanted to scream, but I couldn't. I had to convince myself, using only the sliver of courage I had, that I was safe.

As it progressed, I wanted everyone to like me. If I thought they didn't, I would let that affect me, always trying to figure out what I did wrong. I thought everything was my fault, that I was the problem. I apologized for everything, even when I had nothing to apologize for.

It did get better, but only after years of the shadow over me. I started to understand what I felt and how I could deal with it. I finally started to understand myself, and then COVID changed it all. Isolated at home, I was sad all the time and had no motivation. Summoning a

little bit of courage, I talked to my mom. My mom is the definition of living each day with courage. Even with her own battles, she would help me see the sunshine. She will always be my source of courage. Having her help me with my mental battles gave me the courage to keep going.

As a freshman, sports and school would always keep me busy, but my shadow was always there, reminding me I needed to be perfect. I liked to sprint during track season. I enjoyed the feeling of running as fast as I possibly could. It made me so happy to be able to sprint my heart out, but on meet days it was very different. I would get to the blocks and just like that my nerves took control. While I ran, I knew I wasn't going as fast as I could. After I stopped, I had an attack. I loved sprinting, but even with so much light, the shadow found me. Teddy Roosevelt said, «Black care rarely sits behind a rider whose pace is fast enough.» I agree that one has to have a direction in life and has to be working towards it, but in track, I found I could not outrun my shadow. I didn't know why my nerves affected something so physical and something I love so much, but they did. Every time I step up to the blocks, I have to dig deep and find my courage and look for the sunshine. My shadow at times can be a weight and overpower me, but I have to fight my shadow with courage. Even though it is there to take in light away, I choose to fight it with courage and look for the sunshine. When I do that, I'm the one who empowers it, with resilience.

Life is full of sunshine and shadows, everyone has their

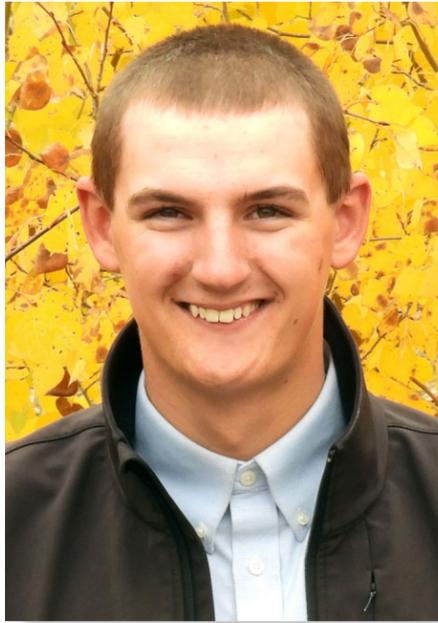
own to deal with. One day one could be walking down the street enjoying the sun and the next second a shadow could ruin it all. Happiness and depression, peace and war, calm and storm, sunshine and shadows are a part of each of our lives. One has to live every day with grit and determination, choosing to see positivity instead of shadows. Every day one can wake up deciding to see a beautiful sunrise full of the splendors and possibilities of life or choose to see the storm right above the sunrise full of the ugly flaws of life.

Some people hide their battles and I can see the wall hiding within them. I try not to judge people, for I don't know what they are going through. Some people like to show only their sunshine even though their shadows are hovering. I have always thought I need people to like me. Thinking about that trait I realize I empathize with them and want to help them. Everyone has their shadows and if I can help them with their battles then I will be doing everything I can.

I may have a lot of shadows in my life, but I do have my sunshine. I have some close friends and a family that loves me. Not only that, but I will always have support when I face my shadows. I have a purpose in life, one that I want to fulfill. I work hard and plan to help others with their own shadows, the ones you can't always see. Even on my worst day, I get a chance to change, and for that I am grateful. You can face life looking back at your shadows, or you could look forward to your sunshine, even if it is as simple as a beautiful sunrise.

As I'm getting older, I am learning to live more with courage than fear.

I still have attacks and days when I don't want to get out of bed. I still have to have a clean room but some things I let it slide. I still have my nervous ticks, fiddling with fingers or randomly jolting. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like if I didn't have to deal with my mental struggles. I know the answer, but I know that I can't change the past and I shouldn't dwell on it. Everyone has a shadow they have to deal with. The best thing we can do is to take every day with courage. I have learned and grown; I'm not the person I was four years ago. Yes, I still have my battles, but I keep growing and improving. I am choosing to live with courage.



HOW TO BE A "HAPPY BUNCH"

By Thaddaeus Christensen
C.H.I.L.D. Home School

As implied by the fourth principle described by James Owen, "Do what has to be done", some things just need to be accomplished. Quite often there are reasons for not doing the task required, whether that be cold weather, exhaustion, or even uncertainty. To make the decision constantly to simply do the task at hand can make a huge difference in both your life and the lives of those around you. To do what has to be done is, in my opinion, something that we should all strive to do.

I recall needing to take action immediately last winter, when a hydrant froze in the cold. My brother called me that morning to ask for my help repairing a frozen hydrant, so all of the livestock

could be watered. Thus, I gathered the tools that I foresaw needing and headed to the ranch immediately despite my other plans for that day. At this time, I was simply making plans to thaw the hydrant, since I believed that it was simply frozen. Upon arriving it became clear that the main internal shaft of the hydrant had snapped. At this time, I realized that most of the tools I had brought were not what was needed for the task: still my brother and I started disassembling the hydrant. After about an hour of work on the hydrant we determined that the assembly could not be repaired, so a new hydrant was needed. That required someone driving to the nearest town to purchase a new hydrant.

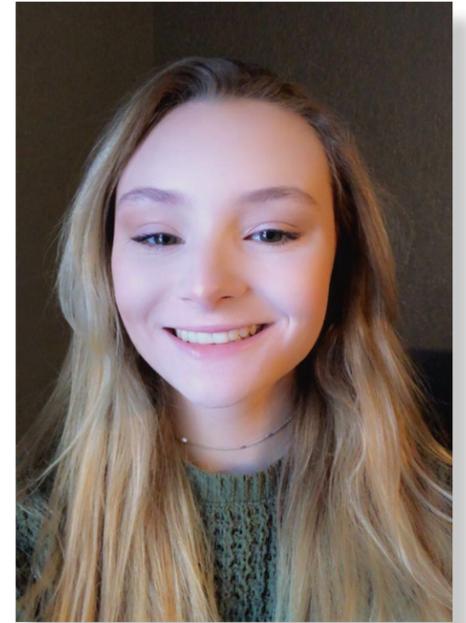
Much later in the day, when we got the new hydrant back to the ranch, we noted that the new shaft would not be compatible with the old stem, that still remained buried four to five feet in the frozen dirt. At this point we had two options: dig out the old stem and replace the whole thing, or the idea which I suggested, modify the new shaft. After discussing the pros and cons of these two options it was decided that we would modify the new shaft. I had been reluctant to suggest the idea because I knew that I would need to cut the new shaft very precisely and then cut new threads into it precisely in order for the hydrant to actually work. In order to do this, we would need to make a trip back to the house to collect the right tools (mainly the tap and die set). This would mean making the modifications in the dark due to the time it takes driving from and back to the ranch. This is where I simply did what needed to be

done: I drove home, gathered the right tools, and drove back to the ranch. I then was able to make the modifications, and after two failed attempts I succeeded in creating a working hydrant and was able to water all the livestock that had been waiting. I was glad that I could fix the hydrant even in the cold weather and in the dark. My family was a happy bunch, because if I had not done what needed done, they would have been hauling water from the frozen creek to the corrals for the livestock, while still needing to repair the hydrant.

Another instance of not only me, but the entire community, doing what needed to be done is when an iconic business in town received a foreclosure notice and had to vacate their premises and we came together to help them. This was a doubly bad situation as the store was also the residence of the owners. As soon as the word was out that the family needed help (three days before the eviction) available community members came to pack up as much as possible quickly. On the first day everyone did only one task: boxing items. Starting the second day, we began moving more things to storage units that already had been partially filled with the owners' belongings. When the first stock trailers started to arrive at the storage units it quickly became evident that we would need to pack the units much tighter and higher than they currently were to allow room for more of their belongings. Two other young men and myself offered to remain at the units and condense the items before more arrived. Although it was a very serious time, we were able to have fun while doing what needed done:

after a long day of stacking and moving items (including lowering a full dresser from a second story balcony) we were still a happy bunch, largely because we had accomplished what needed to be done. We had allowed the owners to move more belongings from their house and store than would have been possible by themselves.

Through these examples I hope I have been able to show you why doing what has to be done is very important. Whether a simple fix of equipment or days' worth of packing and moving someone, you not only gain experience, but you will almost always be able to help someone else at the same time. I live by this principle every day when I feed and water livestock and maintain and repair vehicles and equipment. I have learned to jump in and do what is needed wherever I am. I hope that in the future I will always remember to do what has to be done and follow the cowboy ethics and therefore promoting and building a happy bunch.



LIVE EVERY DAY AS IF IT IS THE LAST

By Brianna Hansel
Douglas High School

When I was young, I had a dream. I remember the stark white walls of the room making me feel small and insignificant. It was glaring and terrifying, but not as terrifying as the frail person lying in bed. The person had always been filled with energy and life. Her smile always lit up the room, yet now she lay sunken in the bed, swallowed by this grim room. My mom, my best friend, was dying in a hospital bed. The constant beep of the machines created a painful melody that rings in my ears. When the beeping slowed, it was eventually replaced with the screeching sound as her heart stops. The sheer pain I felt at that moment caused my eyes to fly open and I started screaming for my mom as fear and terror ripped through my little body. Still in that

sleep induced haze, I struggled to make sense of where I was and what had happened as my mom ran into my room with a fearful look upon her face. But when she realized I was not in danger, her comforting smile greeted me while she engulfed me in her warm embrace as I cried onto her shoulder. I thought my worst fear had come true, but here she was, her body still warm and alive. My mom reassured me she was not going anywhere for a long time and hugged me close as I cried. I never had a fear or care in the world if she was with me. She is my rock, my best friend, and it has been difficult for me to do basic tasks without her. I rely on her to be there for me when times are tough.

The memory of the dream and the fear I felt dissipated as time went on. But it resurfaced like a punch to my stomach in May 2020 when I was hit with the harsh reality that I could lose her. We were still in the depths of the pandemic, learning from home and enjoying family hikes every weekend because everything in the world had been canceled. Yet, my parents tried to be optimistic about the situation. A lot of women get breast cancer and are fine after a few treatments. Like any teenager without a ton of life experience, I believed in their optimism. If others could beat it, why would my mom not be able to? Even so, I still had this growing anxiousness in my body. Mind. Heart. It felt like our lives were shattering as the reality of cancer began to take shape and the shadows of my dream became reality.

But I tried to copy my parents' enthusiasm, so on their wedding anniversary, my brother and I

baked a cake for them while they went to another doctor's appointment. This one was a big one, where we would learn the type of cancer, the stage and how it would be treated. In all of our hopefulness, Hunter and I frosted and sprinkled as if that would magically make everything okay.

When they walked in through the door, they tried to keep their composure. But when my dad saw my brother and I looking hopeful, he broke down and wept. It hit me hard when he started shedding tears, my dad is a tough person who tends to avoid outward emotion. So, I knew the results were not going to be pleasant. It was stage four. The words echoed in my mind as my heart constricted while I played out every dreadful ending I could possibly imagine. I tried to hold it in, but my dad engulfed me in a bear hug. I saw my mom's headstone, my dad and brother wasting away in sorrow, and myself losing part of who I am. I could not lose my best friend, the only person I could ever rely on. This invisible killer was going to take my mother away. She would never see me or my brother graduate or be at our weddings. She would never

meet her grandkids and be there through every milestone of my life. I would never get to see her cooking our holiday meals with my aunt and grandma while laughter rings throughout the house. There would be no more mother-daughter days, or late-night conversations. So, as I reached for someone to be my rock, I did not reach for my mom for my mom's arms did not seem so secure anymore.

While my mom tried to reassure all

of us that she had had a good life and it was not up to her, you could see her pulling up every ounce of strength she could to prepare herself for telling my grandparents and aunt. Mom shared that she just could not give that news over the phone, so we quickly jumped in the car for the 30-minute drive there. Thoughts were overwhelming my

mind, but all I could do is repeat to myself 'do not cry, be strong, mom has lived every day to the fullest and has had a good life.' I was already preparing for the worst. When we reached my grandparents, we did not even have to say the words; they just knew why we were there as they caught us in their arms. When we told them there was a point where sorrow and fear clung to the air, it shrouded us all in its blanket taking us to our worst nightmares. My aunt broke the silence, laughing through her tears, "This was not the way things were supposed to go. This was not the plan." And I fell into my grandmother's arms in fear and grief, as we all tried to catch our breath. In that room alone we would lose a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, and a friend if cancer won.

Just days later my mom began her treatments. Even though we were all ready to support her, nothing prepared me for the months ahead. I watched her struggle to fight for her life. I saw her breakdown into a shadow of her former self and yet still have the strength to keep going. And all I thought was why her, why does this have to happen to someone who is a wonderful and caring person, why does this have to happen to our family? Why? When she started chemo, it was the most difficult to watch.

She became less energetic and tired, opting to spend her days in bed, like my nightmare. She was injecting herself with poison every other week hoping and praying it would save her life yet destroy her body. She lost her hair, and she did not smile as brightly as she used to. She was tired.

I lost myself during this time too. I was hurting and I was lonely even though I had people constantly around me who loved me. Their comforting words, while kind, fell on deaf ears because I did not want to recognize the reality of what was happening. I was forced to start virtual school and I lost connection with everyone I knew. No one seemed to care that I had practically disappeared to protect my mother from the raging pandemic. I found myself in so much pain, and it was not being released that I now have scars on my wrist, my heart, and my mind. The thought of losing my mom was so painful, that I began to think I would rather end my own life so I did not have to face the day she died.

But each step of the journey got a little easier. My mom got a little stronger and a little more of herself back, even as she continued with surgeries and radiation. Despite all that she was going through, she never stopped reminding me that life is precious, and we should embrace every moment.

It felt like my life was crashing down around me and yet my mom said she felt like she wasted time being scared in her youth, instead of taking risks.

Now almost two years later, we are not wasting anytime. We prioritize

time with family and making new exciting memories. My mom is doing well now that treatments are over, and she is always reminding me to get out of my comfort zone because that's where living is loudest. I also see her living in the moment, taking trips with friends and family to places she has always

wanted to experience. But she shines the most when we are closer to home, spending time disconnecting in the mountains.

Here is what I have learned from my mom throughout all of this. Sometimes sitting back and enjoying what is right in front of us, and the memories we have made is the most important part of living in the moment. So, now my mom lives by the rule to have courage, no matter if the future is uncertain or scary. I have learned that sometimes courage is believing the future will be all right, regardless of what happens to my mom. Live each day with courage. For courage is being brave and living every day as if it is the last.



BEYOND

By Jorie Hess
Dubois High School

From a young age, I knew that I wanted something more out of my life and whatevermore that was going to be was outside of Wyoming. Growing up in Dubois, there weren't many opportunities for people who didn't want to remain here. You have your locals who have been here since birth, who sit around the coffee shop talking about the latest gossip. You have those who wanted a change from the city and thought Dubois was a place far from home, and you have those who have grown up here their entire life, and they want something different the minute they graduate high school. I fall under the last category. I've never wanted to go to a state school. I never wanted to stay around Dubois and open up my own business or get a local job. I wanted more as a seventh-grader. I looked forward to life as an adult, so many people say to live your life in the moment

because you will miss being a kid at some point. I'm afraid I have to disagree; yes, being an adult comes with a million responsibilities like doing the dishes, paying bills, and maintaining your happiness. Despite all that, being an adult comes with the freedom to make your own choices, work your dream job, and start a family. Being an adult allows you to expand your opportunities, gives you chances, and even allows you to take risks.

Dubois isn't a bad place to grow up, but having the courage to leave and go after what you want takes a risk knowing that you can fail at any moment. Going to a college out of Wyoming without your parents around, knowing absolutely nothing or no one. You have to "Live each day with courage." I know that I might fail, but I want to experience more outside of Wyoming, outside of Dubois. Moving somewhere new allows me to build my foundation as an adult. Not being able to live off my parents or see them as often. Not being able to use my friend group as a safety net. This allows me to go outside of my comfort zone, meet new people and try new things.

The hardest thing in my young adult life just might be going into nursing and partaking in the nursing program at a college. This, again, is a part of knowing that I might fail. I have to go through the nursing program one day at a time living each one of those days with the same amount of courage as the last." Any nursing program is rigorous; it's hard work and takes much dedication. You have to cut certain things out of life to fit your academic schedule. You have to miss out on many things

that average college students experience. In the end, you take the chances of what you want the most and what will benefit you after college. Many people fail. There have been many failures in my life, but I don't let those failures define me or allow them not to let me do what I want. A failure is just getting you one step closer to success. College isn't the most challenging part of your life, but it could be.

Another event that I look forward to as an adult is using my career. Using nursing in my everyday life will probably be the best thing I will have achieved. Using my knowledge every day, saving people is truly rewarding. My career will require me to use my courage every day even when I don't feel the most courageous as a Travel nurse from a small town in the middle of nowhere. I will be traveling everywhere, seeing everything, learning new things, and discovering new places.

My ambition has driven me to take risks and go after what I want. Wanting to leave a small town for something bigger and better isn't because Dubois is horrible. It has taught me to be courageous and go after what I want no matter what could happen or the consequences. I have always been passionate about wanting to pursue something outside of Wyoming. It feels good to be able to finally. My courage in myself has gotten me very far in life. Striving to be better than everyone else at certain things has made me a very strong individual. Not everyone can say what they want to do with their lives and can't even say what they will do the next day. I'm the type of person that needs a plan and needs things to be mapped out in front of me.

That's precisely what I have done, and now all the pieces of my plan are falling into place, and I can thank it to this code of "Live Each Day with Courage." It comes so naturally that I don't know that I live each day with courage. It honestly just happens.



BROKEN RECORD

By Ceyda Gunduz
Expedition Academy High School

"Ride For the Brand"- they say. Represent where you come from. But what about when all that has ever brought you is shame and hurt? What about when it's something you don't want to represent or be in any way associated with? What about when that's not who you want to be? And what if you're not allowed to choose your own path? When I was younger there were certain people I looked up to and thought

they were right about everything. Their opinions were my opinions. Their ideas were my ideas. As I grew older and began experiencing the world for the first time, I was baffled as to why it felt so wrong.

I grew up extremely sheltered in a community where there was a certain strain of perfectionism in the way we appeared to others and lived our lives. We were expected to represent our family and the community. There was an unspeakable amount of pressure put on the children from a young age, to live up to impossible expectations or reap the consequences that we would bring on ourselves as well and others. We lived life in our own little sealed box of ideas and opinions that our brains had been wired with- our own world of manipulation and misery that we thought was right. We didn't know any other way to live. The information about the world that we had available to us was limited and filtered through the opinions of the community and what they wanted us to believe. I never had the opportunity to see the world and how it worked for myself because of my family situation and because the community taught us to violently reject any idea or opinion that differed from theirs. My sister and I have experienced the effects of this controlling, manipulative community's brainwashing for years since, which our family and people close to us did not see and could not understand.

The first time I actually experienced my own little piece of the world they had described as evil, dark and wrong, was when I went to a small private school for the first time at the age of 16.

This was the first time in my life I had ever been out in the world by myself, even for something as simple as going to the store. To my surprise it was not at all what I had been taught it was. I began to see other stories and perspectives and new ideas that, contrary to what we were taught, were not crazy or irrational. These were all ideas that drastically differed from the ones my mind was filled with from a young age. I slowly began to build my own opinion and perspective about the world and life in general with the balance of information I had. Most people would see this as a happy end to a pathetic story, however I was not prepared for the fact that this change would bring more pain and conflict to my life.

Because of the brainwashing and manipulation of the culture, the effects of which never truly leave you, holding an opinion that differed even a little bit felt rebellious and wrong, was looked down upon, and therefore came with a lot of guilt and confusion. In addition, the people in my life who observed even the slightest difference in me, did not see it as the beautiful growth it was, but rather as me being influenced by "worldly ways." Since these were people I cared about and had always looked up to, loved and admired, it felt so wrong to disagree with them. However, continuing to live the life that had brought me so much pain and hurt me so much, felt worse. This became the point of my life where I had to make the hardest decision I had ever had to make. Whose life was I going to live? The life that was expected of me, which was the only way to live that I had ever known? Or my own life which I

had yet to discover and so much to learn about? It was terrifying. It feels impossible to choose between the people I love, and living my life. It feels like a decision no one should have to make. I have realized, however, that at some point we all have to make this decision to a certain extent.

It can appear in many different forms, but often it is a decision between who we want to be and the life we want to live, or someone or something that has impacted us to live differently. Often we are young when these impacts enter our lives. Too young to know what it would mean for us and how it would affect us. Often it is something we didn't even have a choice in. When we get to the point where we have to make the decision for ourselves, we have no concept of how to approach it. It is painful and scary to choose a different path than what we are used to, and often it is not understood by the people around us who have not had the same experience we have. Every person is different. We tend to forget that, and many people seem to think that the right way to live is the way that is right for them. They don't realize that everyone has their own version of what is healthy and right for them. Living someone else's version of right and trying to live up to their expectations will only ever bring us pain and confusion. It would not be living at all, but rather settling and conforming- the very thing they warn us to beware of. I don't believe that is fair or what life is about. This is why I think it is important to learn to represent ourselves.

You will reach a point in your life where you need to ask yourself some very difficult questions,

with the understanding of the weight that they carry: Who do you want to be? How do you want to live your life? What do you believe about life, the world around you and yourself? And what impact do you want to have on it? Such simple questions, but we often don't realize what they could actually mean for life as we know it and how they could change everything. We spend too much time living our lives for other people. At some point we need to live our own lives. It is so much harder than it sounds. It is a long process that can bring so much confusion and is a journey that never really ends. I have learned that in life there is no destination. The entire point of life is the journey, the paths we take, the people we meet, the lessons we learn, the love we give and receive, and the impact we leave behind along the way. It is about the experience. Experience that changes us.

It has taken a long time and has by no means been easy, but I can finally say I have reached a point in my life where I am thankful for the experiences I have had because they have helped me learn and grow into the person I am becoming. They have helped to form the way I see the world and life and have helped me to understand others better. Realizing that other people's specific experiences and how they have processed them is what makes them who they are, has helped me to understand why people are different. We are not what we come from. We are formed by our experiences, but it doesn't have to always be what we represent. Instead we should represent

ourselves; people who have grown and emerged from the ashes of what we come from. We are the result, not the cause. I believe at some point in our lives we need to make the switch from living as what we have been through, to living as who we are. We have all heard it a thousand times, but the actual experience is so much different than we are warned of, and unfortunately, is often not supported by the people in our lives. The truth is that there are no real simple answers. We spend our whole lives wondering, searching and growing. It feels wrong and selfish when you have spent your whole life representing someone or something else and have built your entire personality and mindset around that. It is, however, the most important change you will ever make in your life.

It took me a long time to learn to open my mind to the possibility of other perspectives and ideas, but I have learned so much about life since then. It sparked a new understanding for me and opened my eyes to a whole new world of opinions, learning and beauty. I have learned that everyone has a story and a place that they come from. Everyone has their own experiences in life, whether good or bad, that has impacted them in some way to make them who they are. I have learned that people are beautiful, amazing, complex and fascinating, and that people need each other. I have learned that life has beauty and purpose to be found in it, but we need to find it for ourselves. We cannot live our whole lives accomplishing someone else's purpose.

Sometimes our actual purpose, when we do find it, is similar to

others' which builds the purest and strongest of bonds. We call these bonds relationships, whether it be a friend, a family member, a mentor or a partner. It is a real, deep connection with people, and they may not be the people already in our lives, as hard as that is to accept. We have to find them for ourselves. I believe this is one of the most beautiful things about life and the purpose of living it- and to think it is something we will miss out on if we never find our own lives to live. Ride for your own brand. You are beautiful and unique and your own person, but you are not alone. You will find your path, your purpose and your people. We are all together on this crazy journey of life, we just all need to travel it in our own ways.



THE PRIDE TO WORK

By Brayden LaPointe
Glenrock High School

Hands are cracked and dry, sweat drenches the body, aches and pains are unforgettable as I drive home from a good day's work. All pain is numbed by the thoughts of going home and being able to pay the bills and have a little leftover to buy whatever I'd like. It wasn't easy to achieve, not every person can last a whole 10 hours out in the middle of nowhere, in the scorching sun, working non-stop. I also did not care for it very much, but I did one very important thing. I took pride in my work, I had the mindset that I'd never have anything handed to me. I was gonna have to work for every single thing I got. And I did, I worked

Taking pride in your work doesn't mean to only do your best when the guy paying you is watching.

It means to work your hardest on every job, every opportunity given to you 100% of the time. That is how I live my life, that is my Cowboy Ethic. I live every day to the fullest and make sure that when I finish a task or job, I can leave looking back and knowing I did the best I could offer. My great uncle, a couple years ago, started hiring me to help him keep up on the chores that piled up on his property. He taught me the value of hard work and taking pride in the work I do. "If you work hard, your hands and your knowledge will take you further in life than anything else". Something he said that has been in my mind and heart ever since the day he said it. At first I never knew exactly what he was trying to say. I always thought that the purpose of working was to make money, don't get me wrong the money is good, but something richer, something more beautiful comes out on top. It's the ability to take something unbuilt, uncrafted and turn it into a work of art all with the mindset to do it and the hands to assemble it.

Looking back now, I realize my uncle did a lot more for me than just teach me how to work hard. He taught me the importance of respect, responsibility and forgiveness. After showing me the importance of taking pride in my work, he then began to expand on his idea of taking pride in not only my job, but my whole life. Don't cheat, whether it be on a test or on a person. Do the right thing even when no one is watching and no one may ever find out. Always be honest with yourself and your peers, Take pride in yourself, feel good about yourself and who you truly are.

Taking pride in your work. That

is the best way to make a name for yourself and earn every single bit of knowledge and money on the way. Nothing is given for free, and sometimes people aren't always watching to make sure you are doing the right thing. Build respect and you get respect, build confidence and feel good about yourself. Take pride in your work and earn a lot more than just an hourly wage.



A COWBOY'S PRINCIPLE FOR LIFE

By Gracie Keizer
Keizer Home School

A lone cowboy peered over the edge of a ridge, concealed by a couple large clumps of sagebrush. Intently, he gazed at the dimly moonlit scene below him. In the dry grassy valley beneath the ridge, a hundred head of cattle grazed, seemingly oblivious to the band of

masked men who surrounded them. The cowboy knew exactly who the men were—rustlers. Behind him, his horse whickered softly.

“SSH!” he hissed. Freezing as a couple of the nearer men turned their concealed faces in his direction, the lone cowboy hoped they had not heard his horse. Fortunately, the cattle-thieves seemed not to have heard the noise clearly. They turned back to their task. Quiet as stalking cats, the rustlers maneuvered into position behind the cattle. From the direction they were pointing the cattle, the cowboy realized these bandits would try to run their beasts up the valley away from his ranch. They would then head straight across the prairie to the nearest ranch, where the brands would be defaced. All this, of course, would take place in one night so that no record could be left for the next morning when riders from his ranch would come searching for their missing cattle. The lone cowboy knew he had to act. Briefly he hesitated, weighing the risks. He knew that if he did commit himself to the hair-brained scheme he had in mind he might not come out alive or in one piece. For a few moments, he debated with himself. Finally, his eyes hardened, and he nodded his head, the internal battle decided. As he prepared for a fight, he grimly thought to himself, ‘Well, when you make a promise, you gotta keep it.’

Just like the cowboy in my narrative, I too have been faced with a similar choice of whether or not I believe it worthwhile to keep my word. Occasions often rise where I would rather back out of my promise than stick to my guns.

At these times I remind myself that if I wish to be known as a girl of honor and integrity, I must keep my word. Interestingly, many people live under the delusion that they only have to do what they said they would do IF they said ‘I promise’. This is a terrible mistake. Such a decision can lead to terrible follow through later in life. As for me, I believe that when I say I will do something, I need to fulfill my word. From the time I was little, this lesson has been hammered home. My parents would often insist that I do something I did not want to do, such as help my brothers with a project, or practice my musical instrument, simply because I had made a commitment. One specific example from later in my life would be when I ran cross-country. At first, all I wanted to do was quit because the work was grueling and I did not seem to be making any progress. Instead I pressed on, knowing that even though I might not be a very talented runner I was still a part of the team, and that team was counting on me to run my best no matter how I placed. Besides, I had given my word to my coach that I would run cross-country, so I kept my promise. I now understand that though there are many virtues that form a part of becoming a person of integrity, keeping my word is a great place to start. One reason is that it teaches discipline and commitment, lessons I can implement for my future. Another excellent reason would be that this lesson teaches the power of words; if what I say I will do does not matter, how can anything I say matter? If words truly possess the power and potential to encourage or destroy, as I believe they do, perhaps I should carefully

weigh not only what I say, but if I sincerely mean what I say. Over the years, these beliefs have only solidified and strengthened. Now, I understand that when I give my word, I am committing myself to yet another test of character, to see if my integrity continues to hold true. Tried by fire, I am determined that each step I take will continue to build my character. With this resolve firmly embedded in my spirit, I know I am equipped to handle whatever life may throw at me. When I make a promise or give my word, I will keep it.

Silent as a shadow, the lone cowboy wiggled back from the edge of the ridge. Scurrying back to the spot where his horse was tethered, he swung into the saddle and cocked his revolvers. Calmly, he breathed deep—and charged down the ridge. Yelling like a banshee and firing his guns, the lone cowboy thundered down upon the astounded rustlers.

Recovering from his shock, the leader of the rustlers shouted, “Stop him!” Immediately, the rest of the rustlers whipped out their own guns and started firing at the figure bearing down on them. Fortunately, since the light was so dim, the cowboy was hunched over his horse, and he was mounted on a moving target, none of the bullets found their mark. For his part, the cowboy did not even attempt to shoot the cattle-thieves. Instead, he continued yelling and shooting off his remaining bullets, which had their desired effect. The cattle spooked. Terrified, they stampeded out of the valley, straight through the would-be rustlers. The panicked yells and screeches of the bandits added to the din of pounding hooves as

they wheeled their horses and ran before the mob of cattle. Behind them all rode the lone cowboy, keeping the cattle moving forward by smacking the rumps of the back steers with stinging blows of his rope. Almost before the rustlers realized what was happening, they could dimly perceive the warm lights of a ranch house. Instantly, they realized they were being herded towards a trap. Forgetting all their ambitions, the bandits cut and ran, scattering in all directions. Relieved, the lone cowboy watched as the thieves raced off into the night. Unfortunately, he still had to contend with the cattle. The beasts continued in a straight line, stampeding straight towards the ranch. Urging his horse forward, the cowboy managed to reach the head of the panicked herd, where he promptly started whacking away with his rope at the leaders’ heads. Intent on his job, the lone cowboy did not even notice the other riders until they were right next to him. All at once, he realized he was not alone. He nearly started whacking the new riders with his rope before he recognized them as his comrades.

“’bout time you showed up!” he exclaimed in relief.

“Couldn’t leave you alone to stop a herd o’ cattle,” one of the other riders replied with a grin before returning to the task at hand. For a moment it was touch and go. Finally, the lead steers started to turn away from the ranch with a only a few hundred yards to spare. Between them, the cowboys then managed to corral them in a paddock for the night. The following morning, they could be returned to the range to graze. Wiping sweat from his brow, the

lone cowboy led his mount away from the paddock. As he walked back towards the ranch house, the boss intercepted him. For a moment, the two gazed at each other. Then the boss nodded slightly, a bit of a smile touching his normally taciturn face.

“You did good,” he told the lone cowboy, awarding him the highest form of praise anyone could receive from him.

“I did what I said I would do—take care of the cattle,” the lone cowboy replied honestly. “And when I make a promise, I keep it.”



EMPTY BED

By Karina Lea
Hot Springs County High School

What exactly I said that night is lost to me, buried beneath months and months of ten-word correspondences and a desire to leave the memory on

the stairs where it found me. I remember robotically typing out the questions that I had seen on suicide prevention pamphlets and hypothetical scenarios online as my brain tried to simultaneously rationalize the situation and completely refute its existence. The keys blinked under my trembling fingertips as I weighed the impact of every syllable.

Tip-tap. Tip-tap. Send.

Me: [How many did you take?]

Pins and needles danced in my numb legs like TV static in my veins. There was an invisible weight in my gut, as though the pills my friend had taken were settling in my stomach too. Bile kept clawing up the back of my throat while my bedroom spun around me. I wasn’t doing anything. I was a limp doll sitting uselessly, knowing that just a mile away, my friend was drowning in pain pills and vodka. Time stretched on as my world stopped. I watched those three dots appear and disappear onscreen; I hated them. Let me see, I begged, Tell me what to do.

[Alex is typing.]

[Alex is typing.]

[Alex is typing.]

Alex: [the whole bottle]

The first time it happened was in the fifth grade. The transition between elementary and middle

school was marked with the acquisition of a “Big Girl Room,” complete with switching out my flower-shaped ceiling fan for a circular white light and my soft green carpet with hardwood. A few months before the Big Girl Room came the Big Girl Phone: a hand-me-down iPhone 5 with a few cracks in the corner and with it, the internet. My Library of Alexandria. A brand new world was introduced to me. All at once, thousands of books, shows, and movies--things I would have never even considered reading or watching--were at my fingertips. More influential than the media itself though, were the people it introduced me to. At the swipe of a finger, I could be a part of any community I pleased. Around every corner was someone new, welcoming me to that vast, virtual playground, and inviting me to play. One of those people was Malikai.

Malikai was my first strictly internet friend. We met in a chat room discussing an animated show I was obsessed with. A few minutes stretched into hours, and I exchanged the passing daylight for a new friend. Eventually, I needed to go have dinner, so we exchanged tags on an anonymous messaging app. From there bloomed my first online friendship. I don't know how long we were friends before I was sitting on my bedroom floor, crying until my throat hurt and begging him not to pull the trigger. Scary, yes, but I managed to talk him down and that was the important part. Malikai was my first step into that frightening side of the human psyche, but at that point, I assumed it would be an isolated incident.

Oh, how wrong I was.

I'm scared of the dark because that's when the monsters in our heads come out. I saw them the most in middle school over a string of months that continues to circle around in my train of thought. During those late nights, the boogeyman was real to me. While I was sleeping, he crept into the bedrooms of the people I loved and snatched them away, leaving me to wake with a feeling of tight unease and the fuzzy image of an empty bed. One after the other, I got the news through phone calls or hearsay.

“Karina, I tried to do something stupid last night.”

“Have you heard? They say Delia tried to drink herself to death.”

“Kale went right after and swallowed that whole bottle of sleeping pills.”

Three close friends were all sent to the hospital one after another. I was only twelve or thirteen. The worst part was that, as much as I was left wondering about why they vanished, I had been warned that it was coming. There were signs I was too afraid to read: increased substance use, lingering silences that stretched just a little too long, the straight-up admission that not all was well. Even though I was scared, I didn't say anything. *The adults aren't concerned*, I thought. *If the adults aren't concerned, then surely there's nothing to worry about. Right?* The idea of stepping wrong and breaking the delicate bridge between myself and my first real friends was terrifying. The sinking realization came to me that somewhere, my friends were waking up in white rooms with their shoelaces missing, and maybe

if I had said something a minute sooner, the worst that could have happened was broken trust.

I managed to convince Alex to go to the hospital that night. After several nervous minutes of pacing outside her bedroom door, I finally decided to wake my mom. Together, we sat on the stairs and she guided me through the right words to say to ensure that Alex knew that the temporary anxiety of asking for help was far superior to the finality of death. It took a few minutes of careful coaxing, but even though I was sure he must have been ten times more scared than I was, he worked up the courage to have his parents take him to the emergency room. We exchanged little words until he got to the hospital, where his side went quiet after he reassured me that he was going to get his stomach pumped and that he'd text me again when he was out of the hospital. It was deceptively casual, as if we were just wishing each other goodnight instead of drawing the curtains shut on an event that changed our lives. After a few minutes of waiting for him to reappear and say something else, I resigned myself to the fact that I wouldn't know what happened until morning and set my phone on the stairs next to my socked feet. Every sensation on my body was dull. Distantly, I was aware of my feet, planted deep in the olive green of our old shag carpet, and my mother's creeping willow branch arm over my shoulders. She didn't try to say anything to make me feel better; I think she knew there was nothing I wanted to hear. We must've sat there for half an hour, staring at nothing before the heat in my chest rose to my

eyes and poured out as a scalding rain. My mother held me through my hurricane even as the cascade soaked the shoulder of her shirt, even as I felt the sea of what-ifs swallow me whole.

I think that what saddens me most is that night wasn't unique to me. As of 2019, Wyoming has the highest suicide mortality rate in the nation: 29.3 suicides for every 100,000 people. The big question a lot of people ask is, “Why?”. Wyoming exists within a culture where mental health and tragedy have been swept under the rug because we've been taught that needing help means that we're weak. This isn't unique to Wyoming, but I believe that it's amplified by the physical and emotional distance between us. Vulnerability is one of the rawest sides of the human psyche we can show and one of the most terrifying to share. It's also the quickest crusher of trust. I think that the term “Cowboy Up” has been horrendously misinterpreted to mean that the only way to be strong is to go at things independently, to face any challenge with unyielding confidence no matter what. However, I find that that's a false narrative. Sharing our weaknesses is the strength of humanity.

My friends came back home as different people. Their treatments were the beginning of their recovery, not the end. It took weeks, sometimes months, for them to open up about their experiences, but when they did, I knew the best thing I could do was listen. Mental health is a terrain that varies wildly between each and every person, but one of the main things that my friends kept coming back to was isolation. Part

of the problem was that mental illness was just something people didn't talk about. Parents weren't willing to accept that something was actually happening to their child because they were scared too. Adults either tiptoed completely around it or treated the matter like it was a political statement to be freely debated, as if them complaining about how “*These kids are too soft.*” would keep another kid barely old enough to drive from slitting their wrists.

Knowing that staying silent is what nearly got my friends killed led me to develop my personal philosophy: Nobody walks alone. The scariest, and unfortunately most necessary part of that, is speaking up when you're concerned. The most helpful thing you can do for someone you care about is telling them how you feel. Chances are that the knowledge that you do care about them could be enough to help keep them from falling into the pit of despair that calls to each of us so loudly.

At this point, it's been a little more than a year since the last scare. Friends and I joke about it now, and it helps us cope. We joke about grippy socks, horrible cafeteria food, and awkward group therapy sessions, but there's always a sinking feeling as I'm thrown back into a time when the world came crashing down with a text message. A major symbol of the mental health movement is the semicolon because it represents a pause in life, rather than the end. Life goes on. People who I once worried wouldn't make it through the night are now college students, hard workers, and people who look towards the future with optimism. As hard as it is to remember the

painful conversations I've had, imagining a world where I didn't have them is far more terrifying. The only way we can truly ensure that nobody walks alone is by learning to be kinder human beings, capable of lifting others even when we're not sure we can manage the weight.



BEST FRIENDS FOREVER

By Lily Hitchcock
Lander Valley High School

A promise can be many things. A promise is a whispered vow, locked into a jeweled box deep in the recesses of your mind, or a jubilant oath, shouted from a balcony for everyone to hear. A promise can be created by gingerly intertwined pinky fingers, or a confident assurance of “cross my heart and hope to die.” A promise is an invisible thread tying two people together and refusing to let

them walk too far away from one another. Most of all, a promise is meant to be kept.

...

For me, the summer before second grade was a magical time, most notably marked by a visit to Smokey Hollow, a lake in Wisconsin beloved by mosquitos and children alike. While there, I jumped on a giant trampoline, caught frogs (and later released them, disgusted), watched fireflies, and rode in a glow-in-the-dark parade. It was against this sunny backdrop that the fateful promise was made.

After a long day of burying each other in the grainy sand and trying to convince our lake-averse grandma to swim with us, my cousin Emmy and I begged a few dollars off of our mothers and raced to the gift shop where we each handed a crumpled, sand-smearred bill to the woman behind the main counter. Two minutes later we returned from the shop holding swirled soft-serve cones, already beginning to melt, and sat down in the chairs on the front deck of the shop, feet dangling. In that moment, I was completely content.

Emmy and I talked about our favorite Disney movies, argued over whether pink or turquoise was prettier, imagined what it would be like to be a mermaid, told each other about our respective towns, and exclaimed over the planes flying above us. Finally, exhausted from the heat and covered in the sticky residue from our ice cream, we paused our conversation. My cousin looked at me. "Best friends forever?" she asked. I looked back at her, twirling her curly blond

hair that I had always been jealous of, wearing a pink polka-dotted swimsuit that matched mine, her cheeks even rosier than usual because of the sun.

Did I see pain in her blue-green eyes? Did anything in her expression belie the nightmare that was her life? I answered solemnly, "Best friends forever."

...

Eight years later, and the conversation at Smokey Hollow seems a lifetime away. Eight years later, and my cousin, once top of her class and beloved by her teachers, has dropped out of high school. Eight years later, and I haven't heard from her in four. In just four years, everything in Emmy's life has fallen apart.

One night, while my cousin and I were still in middle school, my mom told me, offhandedly, that her sister was divorcing her husband, Derek. "Good," I said, "I never liked him anyway." I had no true reason to hate Emmy's dad yet, but as soon as the words left my mouth, I knew that they were true.

A few weeks later, Derek attempted suicide by taking sleeping pills and laying down in his garage, car running. His friend found him and rushed him to the hospital. There, he begged my aunt to come back to him; he threatened to try to kill himself again if she didn't. My aunt, at the urging of her parents and sisters, refused, knowing that the abuse she had suffered in his home for nearly two decades would continue the moment she returned. Shortly after he got out of the hospital, Derek attempted suicide again. This time he was successful. When I found out, the thing that

angered me most was, had Derek's boss not gone looking for him, Emmy would have been the one to find his body.

At that point, the words "best friends forever" echoed back to me, and I realized it might be a hard promise to keep. "Best friends forever" means caring about each other for the rest of your lives. It means always helping one another, no matter what. How was I supposed to help my cousin with this?

When my aunt arrived on the scene, the authorities asked her to sign her kids over to Derek's sister. They were distraught, they said. It was only for the night, they said. Already, my cousins, who had been abused and brainwashed by their father for their entire lives, blamed their mother for his death.

Attempting to respect her children's grief, my aunt signed the paper. My cousins haven't spent a night with her since.

It's no secret that the foster care system is overwhelmed and underfunded, and therefore, cases like my cousins' --two teenagers willing to live anywhere, except with their mother-- slip through the cracks. Today, Emmy and her brother have been separated in the system. Neither is in school. Emmy has been labeled "a problem" and a runaway. I have no way to reach her.

Directly after Derek died, I was so hopeful that I really would get to be best friends with my cousin. Now that her controlling dad wasn't involved, maybe she would be able to come visit me in Wyoming, something I'd always dreamed of. When I found out that

she wasn't talking to her mom or anyone on her mom's side of the family, I wrote letters to her new address, talking about how much I missed and loved her. When that didn't work, I sent notes to her social worker, Anna. When I didn't hear back from Anna, my mom helped me write emails to her school, which went unanswered. I've texted and called her countless times and requested to follow her on every social media platform I have. I have no way to talk to her, but I won't stop trying. It may be pointless, but eight years ago, by a sun-warmed lake, I made a promise, a promise to Emmy that I'd always be there for her, a promise that I intend to keep.

For the rest of my life, I will continue trying to find my cousin, to offer her the support and love that no one else has given her. If I can't help Emmy, I'll dedicate myself to helping others like her. I'll speak out against domestic violence. I'll become a foster parent, intent on reuniting families. I will do everything I can to make sure that little boys and girls can live carefree lives marked by campfires and sunscreen and pinky-swears and friendships, because when I make a promise, I keep it. I will write letters and emails and texts to Emmy, because when I make a promise, I keep it. I will love my cousin, forever, because when I make a promise, I keep it.

EMBRACING WHO I AM

By Kai Fody
Lingle-Fort Laramie High School

To others, I might seem like a mischievous kid, or a troublemaker who doesn't want to do anything in class. Some might think I'm just 'playing cool' or acting like I'm better than anyone else. What people don't see, is the things going on inside, the stuff I think about or how I take things people do or say to me. Even how I function on a day-to-day basis.

From an early age my mom had suspicion about my behavior and energy amount. I would always be talking about something on my mind, or I would try to sit still for just a few seconds, get uncomfortable with the stillness, and immediately start tapping my foot, bouncing my leg up and down, or even fidget with my hands. When I was Seven my mom took me to go get a check-up at the Hospital. After my regular check-up, the nurse questioned my mom if I had any issues sitting still or concentrating and of course she said yes. The doctor suggested getting me checked for ADHD which stands for Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Basically, it is a mental disorder that makes it difficult or nearly impossible to focus and/or sit still for periods of time. A few weeks later, I was diagnosed with Severe ADHD. I was prescribed with a medication called Strattera to help keep me concentrated during school. I took the meds for almost two years, but

whenever I took them, I would always feel drowsy and tired. I didn't talk as much as I used to before the meds and got distant from family. My mom and I went back to the hospital one day and asked the doctor if there were any negative side effects of Strattera. My mom explained my attitude and how I acted, and it turned out the medication can cause severe depression. The day after, I stopped taking medication. At first, I felt like I was always forgetting something, like I was missing something but didn't know what it was. A week goes by with no meds, I felt more energetic, and I wasn't so down all the time. It felt nice not to feel out of place anymore, but my short attention span came back. Even at home or anywhere outside school, I could never think about one specific thing or stay on task for very long without getting distracted. Teachers at school would have to consistently tell me to do or stop doing something, and whenever we had to work on something I wouldn't get much done. Not that I just chose not to, but it felt impossible to stay productive and to think about the work, regardless the subject, was overwhelming. I didn't tell anyone about my ADHD because I thought people would think I was lying and just making an excuse, or something. The only people that knew and understood were my parents and the school secretary, mainly because she would give me my meds before lunch.

When I was about two, my dad moved out of town. I would see my dad every other weekend and some major holidays along with 7 weeks of the summer for his visitation rights. Going back and forth

between households with different rules, I became accustomed to acting differently depending on who I was with. What I said, how I said it, what I did and didn't do, stuff like that. I didn't have much of a connection or bond with my dad, but me and my mom were very close, so I didn't like going to my dad's when it was his weekend to have me. I never saw it a "a weekend with dad". To me, it was a weekend away from my mom. My dad was in denial of my ADHD and would tell me I didn't have it, even after seeing my prescription, which is why I think I was ashamed of it.

After my family with my mom moved, a few years later, I kept my ADHD a secret because I didn't know how people would think about me. In a new school with new people and new teachers, I was nervous enough already, I didn't want to think about being teased for something I have no control over. Weeks go by and I find some friends who I trust, and I know wouldn't think of me differently. I still had trouble in class but if I was moving, I could focus a little easier. I would shake my leg, tap my foot, or find something to fidget with when the teacher was talking. Granted, I would still wonder off in thought and miss lots of information about what we were doing, but I worked on as much as I could before getting distracted again. Middle school was about the same. Always talking with a friend or tapping my pencil on my desk, sometimes I would draw little things on the desk or on the paper whenever I would lose focus again. Still to this day I 'doodle' on worksheets or fill in circles on my paper. When I first got into my freshman year of high school,

I started to embrace my ADHD and wasn't so insecure about it. As much as wish to try controlling, I still can't change the fact that I have it, and that I shouldn't be ashamed of it anymore. Now, most of my friends know, and it became a part of who I am rather than what I have. I know now that even if my mind is bouncing from one thing to another, I can find things to help me stay concentrated enough to be productive. Friends, family, and friends I consider family have taught me to embrace who I am and to not be ashamed of what I have because it's a part of me.



AMERICANA

By Luz Alonso
Natrona County High School

It has been many years, yet the flavor of my cherry slushie still burns on my delicate tongue as I pick up the white, flowy shirt.

"I don't know why I still have

this," I confide to my sister as I run my pastel pink-painted fingernails across the embroidered cactus one last time. My once-favorite shirt is now as prickly to me as an actual cactus. I toss the shirt in the trash can across the room.

"You don't want it anymore?" My sister's bright green eyes cross-examine. "Can I have it?"

"No, I'm throwing that one away. But you can have any shirt in this black bag."

"Why aren't you going to donate that shirt too? Is it ripped?" I ignore her interrogation and continue sifting through my clothes, but I am incapable of shaking away the smell of the cherry slushie that seeped out of the shirt's fabric staining my fingers. Suddenly, my brain is turned into ice like a slushy brain freeze as an ice-cold memory sears my mind.

It was a scorching hot August afternoon. The kind of heat that douses your body with droplets of sweat. The kind of day where it is almost best to stay at home and allow yourself to be engulfed by the air conditioner's delights. If I had known of the later events of my day, I would have stayed home. Nevertheless, on this particular day, my family and I were headed to Thermopolis. We hoped to escape from our normally stressful lives and looked forward to indulging in the mystical escape that is the smell of boiled eggs in a hot pool.

We stopped at a gas station in Shoshoni, Wyoming. I was eleven. My mom's flawless face glowed from the rays of sunshine as she hopped out of my dad's truck. Her hair was a combination of a pixie cut and an afro. She wore a vibrant

peach-colored short sleeve shirt and a pair of black capri pants. My dad had a black chevron mustache and was wearing his usual: a long sleeve cowboy button-down and Levi's. I always wondered how he managed to wear this even on days as hot as these. I, however, was wearing a pair of green shorts, and a white shirt that had a cactus embroidered on it. 'My cactus shirt' as I would call it. My favorite shirt had 'Buenas Vibras' stitched across in pink lettering. Good vibes. I suppose that the following events of my day were brought upon by the Spanish stitching that ran across my shirt.

I, as always, followed my mom into the store. My dad stayed behind filling the truck with gas. We planned to buy our usual gas station snacks: Dorito's and peppermint gum for Dad, a Mountain Dew for Mom, and a cherry slushie for me. My mom poured her Mountain Dew while I was grabbing the Doritos for my dad. Then, the shopkeeper's bell yelped an ear-popping screech. I looked up the aisle, and that is when I saw a disgruntled, bellicose man strut in. By now, my mom had set her Mountain Dew aside and had begun pouring my cherry slushie. The discourteous man angled his walk towards my mom. He rammed past her delicate figure slamming her body toward the machine. He continued to walk ill-mannerly to the back of the store. "Go back to Mexico wetbacks!" Five words that would shatter my innocence and poke at me years later.

As a little girl, I had no idea what had just happened. Or even what the word "wetback" meant. Regardless of my ignorance of

these concepts, I felt my entire body radiate with fear, disbelief, and anger. I stood frozen in time, unable to move. The feeling is like a dream. A nightmare in which you are trying to run and cannot seem to lift so much as a finger. I stood in shock for what seemed like forever. Once I was able to regain motion I bolted toward my mom. She started over pouring my slushie.

The man's shove had made her spill the original. "Estas bien Mama?" No answer. She continued pouring my slushie. The cup filled up as quickly with the icy red substance as my mom's sweet and doe eyes filled with tears. This reaction was just as shocking to me as the events that had occurred. My mom had always been a strong and fiery woman in my eyes. Despite the pain that she felt not a single tear slipped out. To this day, she's not one to sit back and take nonsense that people may say to her. That day was the exception because that man unbearably hurt her, not just physically but wounded her sense of self. He denied me of my sense of belonging. To this day when I remember that trip to the convenience store I still feel the incredulous sense of defeat. It angers me to know that I did not defend my mom from that ill-bred man, as if by telling one person to back off, I would change the world.

The anguishing truth is that cruel people exist everywhere. People who look at you as a race, and not as a human being. However, I know that there are also kind-hearted people. For too long, I denied my culture, seeing it as peculiar. And to some extent, I began to see myself as that man from the convenience store: the

man who robbed me of my identity.

We never spoke of that day, but maybe what we needed was to talk about it. I hid the painful evidence in a bag amongst other summer clothes. I disowned my culture and my favorite shirt, tucking them away to be forgotten. I needed the reassurance that not everyone is as god awful as that man. Because of that man, for years I unsung my ethnicity. He made me question myself and my family. I've never brought that moment back up to either of my parents, I'm still unsure of whether or not my dad knows of the man; after that day, I did not question my mom. I knew that by bringing it back up I'd cause her torment. So, I allow the acidic taste of my cherry slushy to burn my tongue and refrain me from asking my lingering questions. However, I cannot refrain from asking them in my heart. "What can I do to prevent this?" and "Is it my fault for not standing up for my mom against that atrocious man?" and "How do I protect myself and my family from being affected by this tormenting xenophobia?" The events of that day were only the beginning of a chain of occasions. It was likely not the first. It was only the first that I had been aware of. Now, I see changes in my daily life because of moments like this. Now when we are in public, my mom asks me to speak to her in English rather than Spanish. I guess that is her way of not angering local racists.

This event was not the last. However, each time gets easier as I use their hate to fuel my pride in my heritage. However, it still baffles me that somebody can be so full of resentment for a

complete and total stranger. I will never understand it, but in some ways, I have become used to it. I repeatedly tell myself, and I catch myself repeating this unconsciously as I write: *That man did not know us*. He was simply an ignorant, ill-mannered man. To not so much as stop and consider that we were born in America, he just saw the slightly tan skin tone and dark hair and made anecdotal remarks. My Latina brand is something that I have learned to be proud of: although, sometimes it is painful to defend it. Now that I have reunited with my identity I know where I belong. I belong here. However, I sometimes struggle to tuck away the prickly cactus of racism that the man in Shoshoni revealed to me when I was only eleven.

REMEMBER THAT SOME THINGS AREN'T FOR SALE

By Avery Lewis
Riverside High School

About 20 years ago land prices weren't nearly as expensive as today, but that's because people didn't have much money anyway and land was abundant. If you go back 20 years and you head on up the Bighorn mountain you'd see an auction taking place. Auctions such as this one are rare nowadays, so that's what makes this one special. You see, at this auction they were auctioning off hundreds of acres of mountain land, mountain lodges,

and the ski resort. Standing at this auction was a middle aged couple whose kids had all left home and were beginning their own journey of life. The next bid comes up for three lodges, a campground, as well as the ski lodge and runs. Temptation flickers through the eyes of the couple. Should they bid? Would they have any help with the lodges? Would they lose their money on such an investment? What would the family think? After all they asked their oldest son and his wife to come with them but they were too busy for just a simple auction so surely they would be busy for 3 lodges. With all of these doubts present in their mind the couple watched as the bid went up and then got sold to the highest bidder for \$500,000. The couple listens to the next few bids come and go, regret still fresh in their minds.

The next bid comes up for a section of land with about 500 acres. The thought of owning such a piece of property in such a beautiful location flirts with the couple. They look over at their binding partner seeing if he will buy it with them. Sweat beads on his forehead and his hesitation costs them, as the property is sold to the highest bidder. Regret overwhelms the couple enough to get the courage to go talk to the buyer. The couple tells him that if he ever decides he wants to get rid of the property to give them a call and they will take it. Two years later that phone finally rings and they purchased the property; a little bit more expensive than he got it but they weren't going to pass it up this time.

This couple was my grandparents, and they made that fateful decision to take a chance and buy the

property. They sold 150 of it to an inlaw to get a little profit back, leaving them with about 350 acres. The first few years the property was left to a standstill, with a few advancements here and there. My family would go up several times during the summer for weekend camping trips but that was about the extent of it. When my mom passed away, my family and I moved up to be near my grandparents. Moving up there brought us that much closer to the property. We began to find projects we could work on to benefit the property. We put up an electrical fence around a portion of the property that was our campground, this way we could keep the cows out when they were up there for their summer grazing. The fence was hooked up to a solar panel which we implemented, so we could have power to it 24/7. We then began to wonder if we could have water in that area. We got it tested and they said there was a 72% chance that they would drill and find water. Biting the bullet we took a chance and decided to let them drill. The next couple weeks we crossed our fingers and held our breath. The day they announced they found water, was such a joyous day and the whole family celebrated. That same summer the pine beetle infestation was taking over and killing many trees. Luckily our piece of property was barely scaved and most of our trees were pretty healthy. We began to explore our property, finding many treasures and starting to make our own mark.

Many years before our campground spot had once belonged to an old rancher. The skeleton of his cabin and barn still stand strong today.

My cousins and I loved to romp around in the cabin and the barn searching for hidden treasures with our metal detectors. We once dug for nearly an hour underneath an old pine tree, to eventually find an old beer can covered with dirt and rust. To anyone else that may have seemed like trash, but to us it was an impressive and special find. Adjacent to the cabin was a small shack; that was the outhouse back in the day. My family always thought it was the coolest because the rancher who had designed it made two holes. One for him, a bigger one and then one for his wife, a smaller one. Something such as this seems insignificant but it has seemed special to my family.

Surrounding our camp were several Aspen groves. Us kids would run around our miniature forest for hours playing and having the time of our lives, while the parents worked and relaxed. We made our own playground, with log swings and a tree teeter-totter. Many kids have never experienced the joy that we got to that came with our little place in the mountain land. Anymore in this day and age, I'm not so sure kids would even want those experiences if they had that opportunity, but my family still did our best to give others those experiences. Yes my family had been through a lot and it was unfortunate that we had to lose my mother, but in my mind God repaid that loss by all of the experiences and opportunities we got, so we all felt that it was our responsibility to pay them forward.

Our mountain land quickly became the center of our attention as well as the family's rendezvous point. The family members would meet up and stay however long they

could, just enjoying the stress-free environment. One summer we even arranged a whole family reunion up there. When my mom was alive, her and my dad would always go camping up in the Bighorns. It was one of my mom's favorite places; a place where she could get a break from reality and get a chance to relax. After she passed away it took awhile for some of my family to go back up there, without her it just felt wrong. My grandpa, her dad, still has never been able to bring himself to face the mountains again. As it is too much of a painful reminder. My family and I try to see it the other way; the mountains are something that brings us closer to her.

When I was little and my family and I went camping, my father and I went on a hike while my mother stayed home with my baby brother. Me and my dad hiked up this steep, rocky hillside and when we made the summit we found something. Standing there was a stick, with a ribbon tied around it flapping in the breeze. Beneath the stick was a pile of rocks, we carefully moved them aside our curiosity growing. Underneath them was a small wooden chest, with a picture of a woman and her family, a small cross, and a note from her family. I turned around, looked at my dad and asked him "why is this up here?" He said to me, "Someone lost someone special to them and they wanted them to have a beautiful place for them to rest. Where the fresh air always reaches them and they have an everyday glimpse of the gorgeous mountain view". I grasped a dandelion and placed it on top of those stones and we then went back to camp to create another memory with my mom, that we could cherish when

she was gone.

Six years later my dad, brother, and I came to the bottom of a mountain and looked up. We began the 2 1/2 mile hike on the mountain we had chosen and when we reached the peak, we knew this was the right place. My dad pounded a stick in the ground and he laid several trinkets down that were memories he and my mom made together, and her ashes. With tears in his eyes he stepped back and my brother took his place, putting a couple of toy cars down and a piece of cloth. When it was my turn I placed a small toy dog, a note, and a cross. We all grabbed stone after stone, building a big rock monument on top of her treasures. We all embraced, looking out over the view that my mom would now get to see from that day on and began our trek down the mountain. Every time we drive by that summit we can always look up and see the very tiny speck that is my mom's memory looking down on us.

My family continues to go up to our mountain land every chance we get. We have made a cabin up there, and we have made countless memories. Memories that have been from our experiences during hunting season. From getting to go fly fishing in our creeks. Finding arrowhead chippings and even finding a real arrowhead, eventually. We have gotten to bring friends and family up on the mountain to show them our unique experiences and give them a chance to do things they may never have gotten to experience before. My family sees the mountain as a sliver of Heaven, and we do our best to help others experience some of it. My grandpa still hasn't set foot on the mountain since my mom's

death, but we hope one day he too can come up and be reminded of her memory.

When my grandparents bought the mountain land, the price may have seemed like a hefty sum of money but not only has the price of land increased but so has its value. By value I'm not talking about the well full of water, the big solar panel, or the cute little cabin. This value is something that cannot be bought. The experiences, memories, and the joy my family has shared on that section of land is something that will always belong to us. No matter how much someone could offer us for that slice of land they would never truly receive its full value. More so in this day and age, people too easily sell their possessions and forget the memories they hold, greedily grabbing for the money they got from them. The buyers that bought the 3 lodges, the campground, and the ski lodge all for half a million; are selling just two of those lodges for over five million. Yes, they are getting an enormous sum of profit off of this but I believe that it is important that people "remember that some things aren't for sale" and that they choose to hold on to them and value the memories and experiences gained from them. While my mother wasn't in my life for very long the few memories I have of her and of our experiences together are something I will never lose and will always cherish.



THANK YOU

By Edwin Soriano
Thunder Basin High School

Everyday I look back and wonder how you do it. How you became at peace with yourself. How did you let all of those things go? I always think I'm good and happy, but in the back of my mind there's a flame that doesn't want to go out. What does it mean to let go? Is it letting go of pain and sorrow? Is it forgiveness? Maybe it's acceptance. I look back into my life and wonder what events made me into the person I am now. I know I'm not the best kid but I'd like to say I've grown a lot and all because of you. You've been there for me when I didn't want you to be with me. You were there when I didn't think I would need you. And for that I thank you.

I remember the times where we would go visit my grandma. It was the only thing I would look forward to when I was younger. You would

drop my sister and me off for the weekend and she would spoil us the whole time we were there. Eating ice cream, going to the park and visiting the rest of the family there was the most enjoyable thing to do. It was until I noticed you and dad were taking a long time to come back. I would call you every night, but it always seemed you were busy doing something else. Hearing your voice was the best thing during that time. When you finally picked us up you took us to a building I had never been in before. There was an office and you told us to wait there. You left us so you could go into another room for what you said would only be a few minutes. The time went on and all I was doing was counting the dots on the ceiling and the tiles on the floor so I decided to look for you. I wandered into rooms and hallways until I found you. The thing was that I didn't just find you, I found dad too. He was in handcuffs sitting down. I could see the chains dangling around his feet and the marks the cuffs left on his wrist. I must have called out for him without realizing, because the cop, dad and you all turned towards me. I remember seeing the disappointment in his eyes. He wasn't disappointed with me, but with himself that I had to see him that way. You took me out and yelled at me for not staying where you told me to stay, but quickly apologized and gave me a hug. I didn't really understand what was going on, but the hug made me feel safe and that everything was going to be okay. Which everything did because I got to see dad and hug him after 6 months of waiting.

A few years passed, and I know it's been some time, but I can never get the image out of my head after

the doctor told you the news. You were really quiet all that day. I thought you were just tired, but when dad got home and you broke down crying I knew something was wrong. I was in the living room watching cartoons, but I don't think you saw me. I didn't hear much but I could see the sad, empty look dad gave me when he got up to close the door. I thought it was weird because I've never seen you cry before. You just found out there was a chance that if I went to sleep that night I wouldn't wake up. We had an appointment the next morning so you stayed up all night and watched me play my favorite games for hours. The morning after they gave you a machine for me I used to help me get better. The thing I find most inspiring is that you stayed strong for me that whole time.

The night where I got dropped off at home is a night I despise. You warned me about bad influences and who I hang out with. I thought you were just being a paranoid mom that didn't trust her son. That day where you found me outside the house in the snow at four in the morning was the day that I decided I don't want to do that anymore. I recall waking up on the couch and you were holding my hand. You were crying, screaming hugging me all at once and I don't blame you for that. I was trying to be a cool kid and it only led me to consequences. I memorize the hair in the sink that fell out when because of how stressed out you were. Seeing the bags under your eyes indicating that you got no sleep. That night traumatized you. It has you waking up everynight checking up on me in fear that I might not be there. It doesn't let you sleep at night. You start

making up fake scenarios on what I might do next in your head late at night. I want to thank you for helping me and pointing me in the right direction.

These experiences in my life have influenced on how I make decisions here in the present. It takes me a little longer to trust people and I think that's a good thing. I can see the good people but I can also see the bad in them. I've learned not to take so much personally but to also

not let people disrespect me. Those experiences taught me that the right people will stay in your life no matter what the struggle is. I don't know if I am at peace or if I'm just confused. What I do know is that I want to thank you for always sticking with me through the hardest of times and for helping me be the person I am today.



A FIRST LOVE'S PROMISE

By Vidale C'Bearing
Wyoming Indian High School

"Ball," my first words as I reach for the little basketball my parents got for me when I was still learning how to walk. From what I remember I was always around the game, either seeing it live or on tv. I'd like to say I was hooping when I first started walking, standing there shooting on a little plastic hoop, my parents, friends or other family rebounding for me and telling me to shoot again. Whether I knew it or not, this was a start to a promise,

Growing up as a Native American kid away from the reservation, living and growing in a whole different world would get difficult, and the only thing to keep it close to home was playing basketball. I was fascinated by a documentary about kids from my home reservation playing the game.

It always motivated me to keep playing, so every night before a game as a kid I would watch it. Seeing all these young native men playing with raw talent, fast, flashy, great defense, and most importantly, playing and winning, was always fun to watch and inspired me to make a commitment to develop my talent.

As I got older, I started to play competitively in little leagues. The first time playing I got the hang of it very quickly, and my team ended up winning the championship. I earned my very first medal, which I still have. The next year playing in the leagues, I ended up moving two grades up and winning a championship that time as well.

After winning that first medal, I wanted more. I made a promise to myself and to the game that the love will always be strong and never die. I constantly think of that moment and it reminds me to get better and have fun doing it. Everyday I play the game whether it's practice, shooting around or a game. I always tell people that basketball is "my first love" because it actually is. It has brought many great opportunities and lots of happiness to my life to the point where I can't live without it.

I keep the promise as strongly as if it was a promise I would keep for someone close to me. I believe one of the greatest opportunities it brought to me was when a coach called my dad and asked if I wanted to play for a travel team. This travel team was a part of my life for 4 years from 3rd grade all the way to 7th grade. We went to tournaments everywhere in a few of the western states and I did win a lot of hardware to add

to my collection. If not for those experiences I had during those 4 years of playing in AAU and travel team leagues, I guarantee I wouldn't be the same today. One of the main reasons I kept the promise stronger than ever was because it brought opportunities.

I moved back home to the reservation at the start of my 8th grade year. I was excited because after all those years watching that documentary I finally got to wear the jersey that says "Chiefs" on the front. I ended up playing throughout high school on the varsity level and was able to be a part of two state championship teams. Winning those two titles mean to me more than any other championship win I've had in my life so far. In that moment, seeing your people's support and seeing the way kids look at you, had a huge impact on me because that's how I used to look at people the same way when I was younger. To bring those titles back home as a Chief it was definitely something meaningful.

Now, being a senior in highschool it is time to figure out what I want to do after I graduate. One of my dreams is to play college basketball. I hope that I can get the opportunity to play at the next level the way I did growing up, getting an opportunity to get better and to learn. After all that, I want to come back home to help teach kids the game, and give them the inspiration that no matter what, if you put your mind to it and work on it, it can take you anywhere. With my senior season now here it's time to prove that my promise for the game is stronger than ever. From dreams to reality, this promise brought me here.



REFLECTIONS THROUGH THE GLASS

By Jaden Campbell
Wyoming Virtual Academy

One of the biggest lessons that I have learned is that age comes with the responsibility of independent consciousness. Realistically, every person must face this burden at some point in their lives. Part of growing older is realizing that this trait is not one that comes naturally, but it is instead a long process by which one continues to change as the experiences in life create better awareness of both intentional and unintentional impact upon the world. Every day is an opportunity to learn and change as a person, and it is often the culmination of external factors that allows one to fully make a change into being who they would like to be. Alongside this, it can be seen that there is a

distinct line between the intent of our actions and the inevitable consequences. The conscious awareness of our impact on the world means that we cannot ignore this line in the sand, as much as we would like to or as much as we try to turn away from it. I believe that there is one specific instance, at least in my memory, that has allowed me to embrace this perspective.

I have always had a tumultuous relationship with my brother. Upon reflection, our closeness in age has been a driving factor in this, but it has remained that we alternate between being the best of friends and the worst of enemies. The one consistent factor, however, is that my brother has invariably been my physical superior. I might have been quicker with my wit and with the words I carefully chose to tear him down, but when it came to any actual fight, I realized that I couldn't compete. This might have been the explanation for my later actions, but I don't think it was an excuse. And so, with this preface in mind, I am reminded of an instance that proved to be the pinnacle of this relationship.

Autumn in Wyoming is incomparable. When the sagebrush-filled wind begins to turn brisk and the world shines with red and yellow hues, I never feel more at home. It was on one of these wonderful days when my Dad pulled me into his office. I remember seeing my reflection in his eyes. I was looking back at my own image, seeing not only my physical being, but the implication of what was to come. This humbling view has haunted me since. He sat me down and handed me a small piece of paper. My

brother had just come back from his fall sports physical, and he had written on this crumpled note his weight in pounds and the following words:

"My sister would have called me fat."

I looked up from the note. The silence in the room stretched for what seemed like hours. It seemed to permeate into my soul. It looked at the rot that my actions had created and filled me with shame.

Dad stared back at me for a while before softly stating, "Why do you say things like that to people that you love?"

I took a breath. Maybe, in some act of flippant defiance I had said these words to my brother that had cut deeper than I had intended. That wasn't true though. I was aware of what I was doing. I understood that I couldn't beat him if it came to an actual fight, so I had used words that I knew would leave an impact. In my anger at my lack of control, I had turned my feelings into a force that was used to harm him, and harm him I did.

"I don't know," I said quietly, looking down at the floor and not meeting his gaze.

"Yes, you do."

A moment passed. Once again, the silence stretched into the void that was created by my lack of response. The dim office lights seemed to only intensify the darkness lurking in the corner of the room. I looked away from my dad's stare and it seemed like I was being suffocated in the weight of what hid in the shadows.

He knelt down to my eye-level and

said, "I know that you and your brother don't always get along, but he adores you. He looks up to you and he is very attuned to what you say."

Another pause.

"Every action in your life has a consequence. Whether it be a good consequence or a bad consequence, you have to realize that you exist beyond what you think of yourself, and even beyond what you think your consequences will initially be."

That conversation has stuck with me since, and as I gazed at my reflected image in the polished wood floor of that office, I knew that I would never be able to part with my guilt. I remember turning away from this reflection, and looking out the window of the office to be saddened by the realization that the once beautiful autumn day had been mired by dark storm clouds on the horizon.

My brother is taller than I am now. He has grown both mentally and physically, and I have been awestruck as I have watched this change. The person that I have grown up with has also grown, but I can't help but wonder about my impact on his perspective and his life. I think about my brother as I once knew him, the sweet boy that I argued with, and I can't picture anything aside from the heartbreak that must reflected on his young face when he wrote down the words on that note. I never truly apologized to him. I could never find the right words. I know that I probably continued to hurt him in the future as my youth and naivety blinded my view. As I look up at the person my brother

is now, I wonder if he stills hears the echoes of my words in his mind. We organically moved past our difficulties as we aged because of our changing perspective on maturity. Yet, I can't help but wonder, when I see him glance at the mirror in our hallway, if he is haunted by the ghost of a memory that I inadvertently created. The line between intention and consequence is one that is often muddled. In both the negative and the positive sense, there exists the delineation between what we can and cannot control.

I am reminded of a quote from William Henley's poem "Invictus," "I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul." My soul might have been tainted by my actions, but I remember the words that my dad said, and I reflect upon my own words and their consequences. I have control over my influence on the world. I have power to understand where to draw the line. This line was evidenced by the words my brother wrote on that note, and by the influence that I know my words had on him far into the future. Whether or not I intended for this consequence, it is something that I can neither take back nor change. Cruelty often begets cruelty in our world, but we are burdened with the responsibility that comes with inherent consciousness. As we understand the impact our actions have, we must know where that line exists. Whether it be good or bad, there must be a limit to everything and an understanding of the very reality in which we live. Regardless of external circumstances, I am the only one who can change my actions. I look at the person that my brother is now, and I see my reflection etched

into his very nature.

I think about that day in autumn, and as I feel the memory of the wind blowing through the trees, I remember the person that I used to be, and I compare her to the person I try to be now. I have drawn a line in my intentions, but have also drawn a line in my mind. The understanding of when I am about to cause harm is now an integral part of my character. I still know that this process is one that I will continue to develop as I grow even older. I must know where to draw the line. I am faced with the burden that I am an echo-chamber of my own intentions, and my reflection doesn't lie to me, as much as my words might.

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