

American Dream

Essay Contest



2024



BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS
OF CENTRAL WYOMING

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. PERSONAL ETHICAL BELIEF

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.

Templeton’s vision spread across the United States and abroad. 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*, using his books as a launching point to prompt young people 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 either the “Ten Principles to Live By” or their own personal ethical beliefs, has been a driving or guiding force in their lives, 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 2024 first place 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

As hosts of this event, The Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Wyoming 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. Thanks also to the teachers and sponsors who organized the local contests for their pupils.

We’d also like to thank the state and local judges who donated their time to diligently read each essay and tackle 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

Jase Bright

Heathrow Academy
Sponsor: Allyson Bright

2nd Place \$3,000

Savannah Fagan

Encampment High School
Sponsor: Leslie McLinksey

3rd Place \$2,000

Samantha Kelsay

Niobrara High School
Sponsor: Aaron Whitten

Honorable Mentions \$1,000

Ashley Gross

Natrona County High School
Sponsor: Becky Sondag

Grace Good-Jessen

Powell High School
Sponsor: JoEllen Varian

CONGRATULATIONS

LOCAL WINNERS

Kason Adsit

Kelly Walsh High School
Sponsor: Jill Thompson

Branson Bankenbush

Sundance Secondary School
Sponsor: Casey Harmon

Addison Bettinger

Buffalo High School
Sponsor: Tracie Kirven

Owen Calzada

Expedition Academy
Sponsor: Fredrick Schwartz

Graham Gilbert

East High School
Sponsor: Erika Matheney

Tagr Holmes

Burns High School
Sponsor: Deb Carpenter-Nolting

Josie Little

Saratoga High School
Sponsor: Noni Weber

Addison Marcy

Rock Springs High School
Sponsor: Anna Crawford

Maycee McKim

Riverside High School
Sponsor: Travis Rapp

Malayna Paxton

South High School
Sponsor: Erin Lindt

Paxton Philpott

Burglington High School
Sponsor: Wendy Kuper

Elizabeth Sanzon

Wyoming Girls School
Sponsor: Jenny Mutch

Natalie Stoll

Arvada-Clearmont High School
Sponsor: Betsy Mack

Casey Toner

Glenrock High School
Sponsor: Julia Turner

Kayden Tucker

Torrington High School
Sponsor: Andrea Brunsvold

Ethan Van Why

Prairie View Community School
Sponsor: Cole Klubek

Rosalie Willson

Hot Springs County High School
Sponsor: Ayni Garza

Nevaeh Young

Rock River School
Sponsor: Jen Bennett



1st Place

Starving for Courage

Jase Bright

Heathrow Academy

As I peered wearily around the crowded room, I saw dozens of motherless children like myself overflowing with sorrow, pain and hopelessness. Their faces reflected their cavernous hearts within. Orphans are to be cast out into the streets or sent to nursing homes when they turn fourteen to prevent overcrowding in the orphanages according to Chinese law. Many of us witnessed atrocities such as having our best friend or older brother be thrown mercilessly into the dirty, winding streets to beg for food and a place to lay their head. A realization pierced my six year old consciousness: In a few years I too would be an uneducated, homeless teenager wandering the streets of China, scrounging for food and shelter. I shivered at the prospect. Mournfully I wondered, is there any hope for my future? Little did I know, the Mandarin that flowed so easily from my lips would be foreign to my ears years before that dreaded age.

I was discovered in a hospital stairwell in Luoyang, China as an eight month old infant with Spina Bifida, scoliosis, clubbed foot and starving. I was brought to the nearby Luoyang Children's Welfare Institute. A stench of stale body odor hung in the air of the orange high rise which housed 860 abandoned special needs orphans. The barred windows of the gloomy building overlooked

the rarely used playground alongside a pond chock full of gold fish. In subsequent years, I experienced conditions that were extraordinarily difficult as a young child with mobility struggles. My day began with a prompt early rising and rushed scant breakfast before a walk of two grueling miles to school where learning was almost an afterthought. Orphans were relegated to the back of the class and ignored. After sitting on a wooden chair much of the day, we would retrace our steps through littered streets to clean the orphanage until our dinner of rice and hot sauce. Pain was my constant companion, especially after trudging the four kilometer round trip to school. During school recess I couldn't keep up with the other children; my crooked back and clubbed foot betraying my intentions. I longed to be dropped off at school on my dad's electric scooter, with the red scarf we all wore whipping in the wind. In my hand I would have a hot breakfast wrap and he would tell me how proud he was of me. He would tell me to bring our family honor and to try my hardest with my schoolwork. "I love you, Dang Le Heng," he would whisper in my ear as he gave me a hug goodbye. But I didn't have a dad. Or a mom for that matter. I didn't have anything to call my own, even clothes I thought were mine would wind up on another kid's body.

I was a foster child off and on, bouncing between the orphanage and temporary homes. Discouragingly, I was relocated to many different households because no one was willing to care for me for more than a couple of months because my medical profile was too extensive. I felt like a burden and a nuisance instead of a dearly loved child. Rather than attend school during those times, I was needed at the foster homes to help with chores. Amongst the many difficulties, a silver lining at one home was the garden where we planted abundant produce to sell to folks all across Luoyang. Being in the fresh air and having the ability to coax a tiny seed to life was a welcome escape from daily life.

Without warning, one sunny day an ayi (nanny) hastily loaded myself and five other orphans into a car, boarded a train for four hours, then an airplane for twelve more. After a total of 36 hours of travel we landed in Denver; bewildered, hungry and jet lagged. Unintelligible language, pale faces, and a variety of hair colors assaulted us as the ayi escorted us toward a group of expectant people. Each of us were then sent off with separate hosting families before the ayi left us. Fear overtook

me as my fight-or-flight instinct kicked in and I bolted. After cornering me like a caged animal, I was caught. Confident I was being kidnapped, the ride home was full of screaming and wailing in my native tongue until the heaviness of my eyes silenced me. My rumbling stomach awoke me from my slumber just as we pulled into Chic-Fil-A where intoxicating aromas flooded my senses. With a belly full of chicken tenders and waffle fries, I decided maybe being kidnapped wasn't so bad.

For the next month, the family spoiled me by bringing me to see Yellowstone National Park, participate in an exciting summer camp, kayaking, a Montana trip, hibachi, church, horseback riding and food. So. Much. Food! The month of June 2014 was one of the happiest times in my life since for first time I felt cared for, loved and respected. After experiencing America for a whole month, I was incredibly solemn when the nanny came to chaperone us back to China. In order to protect the integrity of the hosting program, the families were restricted from relating any adoption logistics with us. We left America confused, thinking that it was just a once in a lifetime experience.

Back on home soil, the six of us were peppered with questions like celebrities about our journey and the once again the reeking orphanage became my home as my life returned back to normal. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to me on the other side of the globe important documents were being completed and one particular family was preparing for a trip to China.

On September 14, 2015, I became a member of a real family. It felt like a missing puzzle piece of my life had been filled in. Life became incredibly different in every way from brushing my teeth (I had in fact, never seen a toothbrush in Luoyang before) to expressing my most basic needs. Google translate wasn't as much help as one might think. My mom became my school teacher and began to diligently teach me English along with important life skills. As my language progressed, we were able to begin adding other subjects. Learning how to read the word "mat" becomes more complicated when you don't yet know what a "mat" is. My mom persevered every day to help me reach my highest potential even though I was (and still can be) a pretty stubborn and unwilling student. My dad has taught me to respect and care for others so that one day, I would work hard to provide for a family of

my own. My brother and sisters became my incredible role models, who I looked up to as I acclimated to my new life. One valuable lesson I learned was to not envy others because of their appearance or physical abilities. Spina Bifida is called the "snowflake condition" as every case is unique and there are 3 degrees; mine being the most severe myelomeningocele. To help my body function properly, we began medical treatment a few months after my homecoming. Wyoming is ill-equipped to handle severe health needs which led us to seek care on the east coast. Necessary surgeries (14 of them) from teeth to toes and visits with my medical team ensued during 48 trips across the country over the next 8 years. I pondered: What if God created me with perfectly shaped feet that could run quickly? And dunk a basketball. Or legs that didn't tire so easily. To walk with a beautiful gait- with legs that were the exact same length and a perfectly straight spine! I once dreamed about being physically whole but I've come to realize that I'm whole by God and the love of my family. He created me in His own image and I eventually came to believe it. I choose to live each day with courage by having joy in everything I do, especially during the healing process after each surgery. Arduous physical therapy three times a day and re-learning how to walk takes focus, perseverance and mental toughness.

If I could whisper in that six year old orphan's ear, I would tell him, "Hang on and don't lose hope. The nightmare is almost over." There is always hope for everyone even though sometimes everything seems lost or forgotten. God has a purpose for all His people and He will reveal that purpose in His own perfect timing. Instead of being an uneducated, homeless teenager, I am now a son, brother, and uncle who will attend culinary school one day and become the head chef at a fancy restaurant. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "Plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." Jeremiah 29:11. God certainly does have a plan for me, but it took a lot of courage to begin to believe it. He has blessed me abundantly with friends, and most important of all: family. I now have a dad who has coached me in every sport that I participated in. My life has changed forever and I am thankful that God has removed me from my old life and gifted me with a new one. I am whole.



2nd Place

Splinters and Seeds
Savannah Fagan
Encampment High School

I am a happy girl, I have a roof over my head and a nice pair of shoes on my feet. I have a dog that is my best friend, and acres and acres to call my own with some fat goats and gobbling turkeys in my yard. I never have to worry about an empty fridge or the power being shut off. I do not fear that I will be harmed by my own parents. I smile often, and no one ever thinks anything is wrong. But that isn't the girl I used to be. No one knows the secrets behind my smile or the heartache when I see a mother with her children. No one understands that I carry the weight of grief of a childhood I was never granted. I plaster a smile on my face, and I shove it deep down within me. I hide the pain in laughter and dumb jokes, pretending to be normal for so long. Eventually, the pretending becomes real.

After a long day, I finally fall into my bed. The worries of the day dissipate as I wrap up in fuzzy blankets, turning on my favorite movie. Warmth surrounds me and I find myself dozing off. My dog nuzzles up to me and I close my eyes one final time, falling asleep. Sleep is my peaceful safe haven until they come. The memories come ripping through me like a hot knife. There is no escape.

December 15, 2016

... Today she is the woman that is my mother. It's days like these that make me forget the stabbing screams of her pain that she blames me for. Today, she hugs me tight as we hang the tiny popsicle stick sleds I made when I was little on the huge Christmas tree. I forget that just the night before in

a haze of whiskey and drugs, she held a knife to me, cursing my existence while I stared at her numbly. Today, she dances around with my sister in her oversized Star Wars pajamas. The blond little bundle of joy twirls as her curls flow wildly. She grabs my hand and tells me to dance with them. I soak in this moment for a little while longer. My little sister sings an out of tune version of Mariah Carrey and her giggles bring a smile to my face. For once, I forget that our mother would rather sit in the small mudroom surrounded by weed and pills than be with this amazing little girl. I love seeing my sister happy so I push away the flooding thoughts of the nights when our mother is unrecognizable. No traces of the tears at school from horrible girls bullying her for being autistic can be seen on my sister's smiling face. She is stronger than she will ever realize. She jumps up on a chair in an attempt to put the star on top of the tree. When she is unsuccessful and nearly teary eyed, I walk to her and put her on my shoulders so she can reach. I wish I could stay in this moment forever. My mother steps to the kitchen and brings us sweet potato fries and chicken nuggets, but my heart drops. She never makes us dinner. There is barely any food in the house. Something is wrong, and I know it is too good to be true. The smile fades from my face as I wearily take the plate. My sister shovels all of the food in her mouth and is still hungry, so I give her mine as well. She needs it more than me. We all finish eating and I take my sister to the small room we share, despite the house having many empty rooms. She lays her head down in my lap and smiles as I tell her a story. The dark thoughts hang in my head as I keep a brave face for this little girl. I know something is wrong. I hear my mother's raspy cough she gets while smoking. I know the amazing night we just had is the last one for a very long time. My mother's heavy footsteps pound through the house and my head. Fear rises in my throat and I fight back the tears as I finish the story. The car starts and this time I know my mother is not coming back...

My eyes dart around the room, heart pounding in my chest. Hot tears well in my eyes, I remember everything. Memories flood through my mind like a tsunami, drowning me. I put my hands in my hair and pull, trying to grab hold of my sanity. Sweat beads on my forehead but my body feels ice cold.

December 24, 2016

... A little curly haired girl lays shivering on my chest, her tears soaking through my thin shirt under the blanket. The house is silent and frozen. The darkness brings the hours of shivering while we stare out the window at other families sitting around the table lights twinkling. The tear-stained cheeks of the little girl become reddened from the cold as she asks why we didn't get presents. She begs for the woman we call our mom. She whimpers as her tummy grumbles. I hold her closer,

giving her every bit of heat I can. Her curls fall into a tangled mess as she drifts off shivering and hungry. I stare at this child I hold in my arms, I put aside the waging battle within me. I hum a simple song and hold her closer. She deserves better. My grandfather comes to check on us every once in a while but he has a life of his own. My bones ache from the cold and I feel myself weakening from days with little food. The little girl shivers and stirs in her sleepy haze, I hand her the tattered blanket she holds so dear, and with a light kiss to her forehead, she drifts off again. I remind myself why I fight; I fight because I have no choice, this little girl needs me and that's what matters. A solemn tear streams down my face, I remember her happy giggles when I brought home the paper Santa hat. She pranced around with that colored paper on her head a white scarf draped around her face. My mother laughed and hugged us both. I hate my mother. And that finally thought booms in my head as everything fades...

I bite back blood curdling screams. The memories are too much to bear. My whole body shakes as I spiral into hysterics. Reality seems distant while I am consumed by my past. I curse my mother. A bottle of pills was more important than I could ever be. My mother didn't care about us, all I was was a burden. I stole my mother's life before she got to live it so in return she haunts mine. She rips me apart from the inside out even after years away from her. I was her biggest mistake so she became the captor of my childhood, ensuring that I would never forget the pain I caused her. There is no healing.

December 25, 2016

... The little girl clings to me as her bright blue eyes well with tears. She grabs onto my waist and squeezes tightly. "Sissy, don't go." Those three little words ringing in my head. My bags of belongings fall onto the snowy ground as I hold her tightly. My dad rushes me along but this little girl begs me to stay. How can I leave her with the woman who cares more about the thrill of substances than the little girl begging for the mother that disappeared with that first dose? That woman is never coming back, but how do you tell that to a five year old girl? I myself struggle with that reality that I avoid at all costs. I hoped that one day my mother would come back but she never will. I can't walk away. I'm all this little girl has and she needs me. I cannot be the woman my mother is. My heart is warring with me as my dad tries to pull the little girl from me. My mother left because of her own selfishness, but is what I'm doing any different? Do I stay in the powerless house, with empty shelves and a foreclosure sign in the front yard until we have another option? Or do I choose myself and sit in a warm house with a twinkling Christmas tree and a feast on the table while my mother lets that little girl freeze and starve alone and without the one person she needs most because my mother has

failed her?

Even after sleepless nights, I get up and face the day. I still go to school with dark circles under my eyes, covered by layers of makeup, painting on the face of a girl that is okay. I stare at the teachers giving lectures with eyes threatening to close. I try to forget the memories that haunted me the night before, but they hide in the shadows of my mind, ready to rip through me at any time. I go to basketball practice and hope that if I run fast enough, I can run from the past. When I return home, the exhaustion is crushing. Regardless of the weight of my eyelids and body, I do my homework because I have to be better. I have to succeed in spite of the pain. I cannot be the girl I used to be, swallowed by my guilt and grief of a life I will never get back. I get ready to go to bed, pretending like I am not scared of the nightmares to come. Some days are easier than others, but I brave the storm head on because I have no option but to push on. I pray everyday that one day, the nightmares will end. They say time heals all wounds, so I wait.

I left that little girl that day. I did what was best for me but the guilt still torments me. I moved almost 2,000 miles away from that house but the past never seems far enough. I am happy now in the gaps of the memories. I live a good life and know that I am iron-willed, able to persevere through anything. I have lived a lot of life in 17 years but I still have a lot to live. I will not let my past define me, but rather be proud of the good I have done. Through writing these words from the blood of my wounds, I know my strength.

Eventually, my sister was removed from the custody of my mother and is now living a happy life. She does not carry the weight of grief on her shining face. She smiles on no matter what and I know that I contributed to that. I take pride in the little girl I raised now facing the world. I am glad I fought for her, smiled for her, and never let her be scarred by the woman we called our mother.

Most people have a beautiful family tree, strong and resilient like an oak tree. Mine used to be like that. But now the branches are broken and mangled, me along with them, as the tree grows on. I am nothing but splinters of the bright oak I used to grow from. A tree can thrive without a few branches but the branch dies without the tree. But maybe, just maybe, I am not splinters, but a seed to a new brilliant tree. If I live by this as my new truth, then I must do the hard work of forgiving, of letting go, of facing my future and running towards it. So, I leave you with this final thought: do what needs to be done at any cost. Do it for the little girls that deserved better, for the little girls that deserved a chance, the girls that are making the most of the life given.



3rd Place

Surviving the Ocean of Trauma

Samantha Kelsay
Niobrara High School

I looked into his icy blue eyes. The pain, sorrow, betrayal, and simultaneous understanding etched deep in every watery fleck that shines down that stubbled face. That face that brought joy and laughter in the good times, but terror and tears in the bad. I know I hurt him. I know his heart was breaking, and I was the one wielding the sword. I sat there, fidgeting with my cup, sobbing, and trying to stay in control. It wasn't him, it wasn't his fault; but wasn't it? Wasn't he the reason I had these scars, these black marks, these bruises, this irreparable trauma branded into my soul?

My dad used to be great. He used to care. He was my hero at one point. Then he slowly turned into this husk of a man. An empty puppet controlled by Her. Controlled by his fear, his denial, his grief, he dissolved, like sugar in water. I still grasp at the fact that maybe he didn't know. Maybe next time he'll be different, but I know deep down I'm grasping at smoke.

I used to be angry with him. I cursed his name while wishing I didn't. I'm not anymore though. I know it wasn't him. It was, and always will be, Her.

My dad married Her when I was four. Their lives

together were founded on a path of lies and betrayal. To myself; to my sister; to my mother; to all that I cared about, though I didn't know it then. Thus, like a tower built on wet sand, their marriage has been weak, rocky, vicious, and trauma filled. Before he married Her, they seemed to be happy. She was good to me. Loving even. But as days turned to weeks, months, and years, the fake persona of love slowly turned to a sinister, abusive monster. I don't care to think that my father knew of this. Though I know he did. I know he saw hunger. I know he saw the bruises. I know he saw the fear that slowly emerged into a blistering, raw rage. That rage has turned more gentle, numb even since then. I don't know if it's been eroded by time or my continuous refusal to believe based upon the continuous trauma. I know I am safe now. I know I will never know the pain of hunger prolonged for days, or the fear as the doorframe approaches my face. I still have that learned instinct though. I still have that raw, uncontrollable instinct to prepare for a fight around Her. I don't think it will ever ease, and I don't want it to. For its our fear that builds us. That keeps us alive and sane. This fear helped me know when to say enough. When to draw the line. So while it pains me, I am grateful that fear will never leave me, for it protects me.

These white foamed, rage filled waters would calm. Never for long though. It was like I was clutching to a strip of driftwood in the seemingly never ending ocean of pain. The storm of Her anger would rock me, throw me into the depths of despair. I always knew though, I had to cling to that drift wood of hope. The sliver of joy. That wood would slowly build over the years. It started very small. With one person truly, an amazing woman named Derin. My mother. She has always been there, even through the pain I endured at my stepmother's cruel hand. Even when I hid it from her, she healed my wounds. Then, came another stick, another grain of wood. Aiden. My little brother. My light of joy and happiness in such a desolate world. The first time I held him, I knew he was my gift. It was as if the world was saying "Here you go, here's your joy". I will always love him, even as I lose him now. The ocean granted me many grains of wood throughout the years. Though I may not have seen it through the waves then. My stepfather, the man I hold closest to my heart. The man who helped ease the pain, and while nothing could mend the hole my dad left, he stitched it smaller. This ever-slowly growing ray of hope was my life blood. As it grew from miniscule sliver to mighty raft, I too, grew

stronger.

That raft made it easier to stay afloat. It brought me to this day. This pain as I look in his eyes. "I can't go back" I said, "I can't live with you". While most felt their lowest in the pandemic of 2020, I was at my highest for that point. I had found an Island. I was away from them! I ate every night, I was never locked away! I grew comfortable in the warm safety of my mothers home. Then, the virus was lulled and restrictions lifted. I stood watching as my island was threatening to sink into the thrashing waters. I remember realizing I had to end it. The time had come, and I had to build a wall, draw a line, and keep away the waters. That's what led me to this point in my since dreary past. He accepted it. I was driving away, half heartedly listening to my parents as we turned onto the bustling street, into my grandmother's neighborhood, into the driveway. My feet moved on their own accord as I climbed the steps, opened the door and sat at her table.

I thought the pain had ceased. It had been 3 years. I had moved 300 miles away from them. I was doing amazing. I called my dad, and invited him to come to my 8th grade promotion. They ended up agreeing to come. Little did I know then, I wasn't out of the storm, just in the eye of the hurricane. I remember playing with my boyfriend's dad's hair. I was braiding it like I always do, listening to music, and enjoying time with those I love most. I was nervous, but they wouldn't do anything here. I was safe! I had grown comfortable. While I wasn't fully wrong, they didn't lay a finger on me of course, but they did still tear my world apart.

My brother, my sweet innocent baby brother. All blue eyes and light heart giggles, had been swept under. He had been fed to the sharks. I stood on my comfortable island as I watched him drown among them. I tried to stay happy. I tried to ignore my pain. I couldn't help him. I desperately wanted to throw him a life raft. A rope of hope as I had received in his birth. There was nothing I could do though. I was stuck. Watching my ray of hope flicker and die out. All I could do was cry. I remember standing on stage. I was giving a speech in honor of my class. I did well. I delivered it beautifully, or so I'm told. I don't remember. My mind was a storm. I was drowning again. I had never known grief like this. I was caught between rage, the urge to lash out, and my fear. How could I, a 14

year old girl, help him? How could I possibly fix this?

I still ache for the answer to this question. I still see him in my nightmares, in the darkest shadows of my mind. Although, not all that came of that day is bad. I remember. I hadn't realized I had blocked these memories. I had sealed away these horrors of my childhood. It's painful now. Terrifying even. Never knowing when a tsunami will rock my small little Island. Never knowing when a memory will surface. Never knowing when those screams will plague my mind. This terror, it cripples me at times. Though I know it will ease one day. I know it's making me stronger. I know that in this terror that stalks my thoughts and mind, is hope. I know I'm on the path to healing. I know that as painful as it was, staring into those blue eyes and drawing that line has saved me. I have thought about where I would be had I not. All I can think is that eventually, my island would have sunk. She would have succeeded in tying those chains around my ankles. I would have drowned. I would be at the bottom of her rage-filled ocean. So while this pain is something I bear with every step, every breath, and every beat of my heart, I am grateful for it. I am grateful for that line in the sand. I am grateful for the life that line gave me. I am grateful for it, because I owe it my life.



Honorable Mention

The Missing Piece

Ashley Gross

Natrona County High School

I concentrate on the soft snap of two puzzle pieces fitting together. Despite the beauty in pieces that fit together in perfect unison, this puzzle only evokes memories of silent tears and desperate prayers. It has been a few years since I completed this puzzle. It is beautiful; it depicts a stunning beach with the vibrant hues of the sunset reflected in the ocean. This puzzle served as my escape for so long. Inside my room, I was able to put together pieces that I couldn't put together when outside of it. I pick up another piece and then press it down with a tender snap to finish forming a crest on the large wave. I feel a connection to this wave. I visualize it, fighting obstacles through the sea and changing directions along its way to the shore. The courage it holds mirrors my own. We both find our way through intermittent moments of tranquility and turmoil. In the middle of the puzzle, there will be a piece missing. I was never able to find it the first time I completed the puzzle. Even still, all 999 other pieces are stunning without it.

As I work on this old puzzle, I recall my mom's behavior over the years. She often talked about "Them". She would say "they" were watching her, writing about her in the newspaper, or playing games with her, and that I shouldn't join "their" games. During these times I would just nod, my heart slowly sinking, unable to grasp her reality.

I snap another puzzle piece in place as I'm brought to another moment. I'm 12 years old, in the school lobby. I settle onto the carpet adjusting my navy and white basketball shorts, and pull my long blonde ponytail tight. I observe the minute hand as it twists around the clock. I clench my fingers in frustration. Mom shouldn't drive and my dad isn't coming, and now we're late, I thought. I traced the rough cross-hatched lines in the lobby carpet, a pool of tears beginning to rest in my eyes. Threatening to trickle down my face like

a dam refusing to break. At that moment my English teacher walked in. I didn't have to look up to know she was scanning the scene of me on the floor with my older brother standing next to me. I noticed a hesitation in her walk before she asked the question I was dreading.

"Are you okay sweetie?" she asked softly. I forced myself to keep my eyes locked on the floor, trying desperately to hold back the flood threatening to break my carefully constructed barrier. My older brother responded for me. He was always able to say the words I couldn't. I always admired his ability to stay collected, while I slowly crumbled to pieces.

"We're just waiting for our ride," he remarked. My teacher carefully studied me again, a sympathetic look in her eyes, before returning to her task. I've always been an emotional person and longed to be more like my brother in these vulnerable moments. I never understood why I always felt so much. Felt everything so hard. Finally, my grandparents' car pulled up to the curb and my brother and I hurried into our seats for the game. I was excited for our grandpa to pick us up. My dad was out of town this week, so our grandparents came down from Nebraska to help mom out. She was having a hard time. I looked out our window, anxiety building in me as I envisioned showing up to my game late. I watched as raindrops cascaded down my window, like liquid crystals, tracing unpredictable patterns as they raced. It felt like the sky was weeping for me.

I stretch my fingers and move to a corner of the puzzle with a colorful sunset painted across the sky as my mind conjures other forgotten memories. I think back to a time when I had a birthday card from my grandparents. My grandmother had underlined some words on the card. My mom read the card and had me sit at the large dining room table. She asked me to tell her what the card meant, and why those specific words were underlined. I replied telling her quietly, that I didn't think it meant anything, and that they were just wishing me a happy birthday. In response, her eyes ran across mine as she studied my face intently, before nervously grabbing a napkin and pen, writing out only the underlined words to form an incomprehensible sentence. I look over to the picture of the puzzle on the box to see a perfect scene that initially looked simple to complete. My eyes graze over the half-finished puzzle. I remember not being able to understand why my mom acted so strangely in some moments and then within minutes, she would be the most perfect mother I could ask for. I remember times when she would take my hands and dance with me in the kitchen. I remember the music playing from the CD player on the counter, while the smell of chocolate chip cookies wafted through the house. I remember taste-testing the unbaked cookie dough when I helped her bake. Somewhere along the way, I remember starting to miss her. Pieces of her. Over the last few years, the moments of odd behavior, transformed into an unwavering storm.

I place another piece in my puzzle and am brought to my living room. I was on the couch but decided to go work on the puzzle in my room again as my mom's tone slowly hollowed. I comprehend the sudden shift. One moment laughter echoed through the room as my mom and little brother playfully fought over the TV remote, and the next was a complete hurricane. Each word, a lightning bolt, shattering the tranquility of our home. I crept down the basement stairs to my bedroom and knelt next to the puzzle. I carefully picked

up pieces pretending to scan for where they went while my thoughts washed through my mind. My view of the puzzle slowly faded into a blurry canvas, as tears streamed down my cheeks making them tingle. I used the back of my hand to wipe away my emotional haze leaving behind a gentle burn on my face. I just want her to be okay. God, please just let this all end. Time seemed to blur until I heard voices I couldn't recognize interrupting my thoughts. I opened my door and peered up the stairs seeing the bottom of shoes that didn't belong to anyone I knew. I walked upstairs and was quickly ushered outside. The crisp winter breeze wrapped itself around my bare arms, goosebumps forming against my skin. I stood in my driveway with my arms crossed around my chest, clinging to the warmth of my body as I watched a police officer speak into a radio. His posture relaxed and stern features softened into a sympathetic smile as he noticed me watching. Just then, my grandma put her warm hand on my back and helped me into my coat. I turned to see my two brothers and Grandpa walking towards us.

"Let's get out of this cold shall we?" My grandma whispered, gesturing to their car. We later arrived at my grandparents' hotel room. I inhaled a deep breath, focusing on the fresh scent that contained hints of lavender and citrus. My memories of the recent events were pulled back like the tide, into a larger wave of confusion.

The next morning, I woke up to the smell of coffee and bacon. We returned home late last night, and I was grateful to wake up in my bed. I climbed up the stairs and headed to the kitchen.

I was then met with the surprise of a room full of people. My dad was unexpectedly home, and my grandparents had come up from Chugwater Wyoming. "There's my girl!" exclaimed my Grandma Wedemyer. As greetings were exchanged, I chose to ignore the unease in the air. I sat in my usual spot at the table and ate breakfast. As I ate, I studied everyone's masks of happiness, a complete masquerade. Eventually, I was able to talk with my dad. A tight lump began building in my throat as I climbed into the car, and we rolled out of our driveway. Waves of questions built over recent events, crashing into the back of my mind.

"Grandma and Grandpa called me last night," he commented, "I decided to come back home early." I watched him, his eyes fixed on the road. "You guys know that mom would never hurt you kids, but she needs help and refuses it, so I made the call to get her what she needs." I knew he was right. Over the last few years, my house had slowly become an obscure museum of my mom's uninterpretable mind. The mirrors and fridge contained random lists and bullet points of her thoughts. I began to understand, feeling the slight sting of betrayal my mother must have felt to know her family went against her wishes, but I knew getting her support was necessary and everyone had run out of options.

"Where is she now?" I asked, my voice coming out surprisingly steady.

"She's with the doctors, they think she may have schizophrenia." My dad began to explain the disorder to me. But I already knew, she was trapped in her mind, unable to tell what was

real and what wasn't. I had known about it for a long time but now it had a name.

I pick up the final five pieces of the puzzle. We rode the rollercoaster of mom's recovery, but so much progress was made. The doctors found a medication that helped her more than I ever thought possible. I take my time resting the pieces in place to form the opening of the last piece I was missing. The empty void hurt me as if I was missing a piece of myself. After a few moments, I decided to get ready for practice. After middle school, I joined the cross-country and track team. Running always allowed me to think. On my run that day, I thought about the improvements since my mom's diagnosis.

"I'm home!" I called out to the warm house, as I creaked open our front door. My mom peeked her head out of the kitchen. "How was practice sweetie?" She exclaimed, a smile instantly appearing on her face. Lately, she smiled a lot.

"Good," I responded. I dropped my backpack to the floor while kicking off my shoes. I walked into the kitchen and instantly was swept into my mom's loving embrace. I inhaled deeply savoring the sweet floral tones of her perfume, and the smell of chocolate, buttery goodness that whirled through the kitchen. The scent wrapped me in a blanket of cozy memories and nostalgia.

"This is my favorite part of my day!" She exclaimed, her arms around my waist. "I love your hugs."

"This is my favorite part of the day too," I responded. As I sink into my mom's embrace, I realize that I found my missing piece.

My puzzle is finally complete.

Through the stormy ups and downs of my mom's diagnosis, I learned so much about the importance of resilience, acceptance, and most importantly, the strength of love. I learned that love isn't always easy and that clouds will pass. Love is the thread that binds us together, guiding us through life's challenges and uncertainties. Love is not transactional but unconditional. I found solace and completeness in knowing that love isn't just about facing obstacles but also about having patience and rebuilding, one piece at a time.



Honorable Mention

A Breath Of Courage Grace Good-Jessen Powell High School

Courage. "Strength in the face of pain or grief." Courage was something I quickly learned to adapt from a young age. My childhood environments were constantly changing. It was one tragic event to another and I learned to survive in the chaos. I was deprived of the comfort and security people find in their parents and yet learned to comfort myself, care for myself, keep the peace, and not rock the ever-changing boat.

My mother was sixteen when she gave birth to me. The absence and infidelity of my father quickly taught her that, in the long run, it was just going to be us. I won't dig deep into the relationship between my father and me but one of the last times I had seen him he had a manic breakdown. I was over for the day and he had taken LSD, causing him to lose complete control of his mind. He took me in the car at night telling me there was a black cat we had to follow. I was only five at the time, and I just believed him. My eyes wandered out the window for hours as we drove endlessly. He looked over at me in confinement telling me to control the car with my mind. Going full speed, he let go of the wheel and we spun out into a ditch. Getting out of the car I felt the frigid air and looked to my dad in hopes he would carry me while he walked. It was obvious there was not a single thought behind his eyes. I stayed quiet and walked. A sheriff eventually saw us and offered a ride home. That silent car ride was one of the last times I saw my dad. He was diagnosed with Manic Bipolar disorder and spent two years away in the Evanston Psychiatric Hospital. Aside from the baggage of my father, my mom had introduced a new man

into our life, Chance. My five year old instincts knew there was something off about him. He had a son named Hayden, only a couple years younger than me. I watched Chance start his day out with shooters of whiskey and stumble around our house until 3AM, endlessly drinking. The trails of his cigarette smoke lingered through our house. I always felt on edge, especially trying to fall asleep to the sound of him screaming at my mom and throwing things around. Again I adapted, I learned that this would be my new normal. My mom and Chance started having some pretty bad fights, his violence in his words and physical actions became regular. I hated seeing the marks he left on her skin. His drugs lay everywhere around our house. Used needles or meth pipes on our coffee table was an all too familiar sight. My mom tried to keep me away from it as much as she could. I stayed in my room or played outside but turning a blind eye to the issue made it cling even harder to me. I worried about mom constantly. One night, Chance dropped Hayden and I off at my grandma's house, telling my mom he wanted to take her on a "date" to compensate for his recent abusive behavior. She agreed, not knowing the intentions he had for her that night. He paid a girl, Whisper, who was at our house often for drugs, to beat up my mom. My mom has never been a drinker in her life, but that night Chance and Whisper fed her alcohol like it was water. Whisper dragged her outside, threw her down on the concrete. She repeatedly slammed my mom's head, punched her, and scratched her face up to the point it was open wounds flowing with blood. Chance stayed inside and drank, knowing full well what was occurring. He was incapable of feeling guilt. They left my mom out there alone. My mom, who was suffering from a concussion, walked around asking for help. A man saw her and called her an ambulance. The cops who got involved deemed it as "a girl fight" and Whisper had to pay my mom's medical bills in addition to serving little jail time before Chance bailed her out. The doctors performed scans and tests on my mom. My Nana prepared me for when my mom came home and told me she was "attacked." My-five-year old brain tried to process what that could even mean. I knew I needed to be strong for mom and protect her, I knew I needed courage. But the second she walked through the door with a black, swollen eye and bandages over the deep wounds, I just broke. She didn't leave the house, she didn't eat, she told me she felt so ugly and knew she would have scars. We didn't see Chance for a while. I slept in my mom's bed with her and I cried with her. I brought her little snacks and made sure to always tell her I loved her. I knew she was getting depressed and I never wanted her to be alone. I knew I had to have enough love and courage for the both of us. Chance was evicted from the house we lived in. I never did get to get my things before it was gone. Not too long after, he stumbled back into our life. He knew how to read my mom at her lowest points and would make her feel as though she needed him. He would love-bomb her and convince the shell of the person he created that he

was the answer. We packed up and moved into a second story apartment. Chance didn't have a job because he was a small percentage of Native-American and would live off the checks his tribe sent him. My mom worked at the hospital. I would sit in the shared room between his son and me, with a twin size mattress on the floor, one flat pillow, and a little DVD movie player. Hayden and I would sleep and watch movies together, and we stayed away from Chance. We knew better. I waited for Mom to get off work. I would hear the door start to creek open and I would run out of my room and give her the biggest hug. She would look at me and grin with her tired eyes and shrugged shoulders. Chance always made her cook dinner for all of us when she got home, even though he had been home all day. Eventually her exhaustion won, and she resided in her room to sleep. She was out for hours, Even though Chance was heavily intoxicated, he finally noticed. He asked me to check if dinner was almost ready. Worried for her, I stood in the doorway. She looked so peaceful, I knew Mom was sad again. I walked out to where he was. In a timid voice I muttered "I can make us something tonight, mom's sleeping." He looked at me in pure disbelief and anger. He ripped my mom out of the bed and started screaming at her. I trauma-blocked the majority of it out but what I do remember is him knocking down the tv and throwing a dresser into her. Hayden was just as traumatized as I was. We hated his dad, we would often quietly discuss ways we were going to get out while we laid in that small empty room. All we had was each other. He had it worse than I did, when mom and I weren't around, all the abuse shifted onto him. Chance was worse on Hayden because he justified his actions by calling it "discipline." His "discipline" would leave marks and bruises on Hayden but the constant mental abuse was equally as brutal. The abuse continued every day for over a year, until Chance decided he was tired of us. He threw the little belongings I had there, off the top of the second story stairs, while he screamed at my mom and me. I saw Hayden peek his head around the corner of the door and mouth "I love you." Tears filled my eyes while I looked at my mom, who was completely numb. The second that door slammed shut I prayed for who I considered to be my brother, Hayden.

Shortly we were back at my nanas and we never told anyone about what happened. Chance trained us to keep quiet and continue his lies for him. We truly believed he would ruin our lives if we ever tried to speak out against him. He once again made his way back into our lives once again. I questioned my mom, because he was saying he now wanted to move us to Cody, WY. My mom let me finish out my school year at my Nana's before I had to move to Cody to be with her. She promised we would stay in touch through Facetime. While they lived apart from us, Chance started getting my mom into drugs, reassuring it would help with her constant depression. The drugs made Mom more depressed. She stopped calling me and

picking up the phone when I called. I learned that from now on it would not be "just us" like how I had thought it was. I realized all I had was myself. I moved to Cody with them from third to sixth grade. Nothing changed, I learned to become a secondary character in my own life, learned to please people and constantly critique every word that came out of my mouth, and neglect finding any sense of individuality. I was whatever I needed to be to survive. We were evicted once again and Chance moved us to Billings, Montana at the end of my sixth grade summer. I was used to it by now.

Shortly After this, I found a suicide letter in Hayden's room. In disbelief, I read it over and over. I walked down to my mom's room and showed her. She brushed it off like it was nothing. I set the letter back where I found it. Later that day, Hayden got home from school and was met with Chance grabbing him by the back of the neck and slamming him to the ground. "You think your life is bad? You must just think you're so miserable!" he shouted. He pulled down Hayden's sleeve from his pinned down arm to reveal little scratches. Chance laughed in his face and told him if he's going to do it he better do it right. Chance then made him watch while he showed him the "correct way." Around the corner, I sat with my head between my knees. I felt the immense guilt weigh down my chest. Hayden didn't say a single word to anyone for days. My stay in Billings lasted barely one semester. My mom and I finally left and we lived at my Nana's in our hometown once again. I always worried Chance would stumble back into my home at three AM uninvited. Although things were different this time, I knew he was sick and I would hear him cough up blood and would often talk about how weak his body was, yet for years would refuse to go see a doctor. He believed his kidneys and liver were failing. What I did not know was how soon it would actually end. His liver failure took his life. I'll never forget the day we got the call, the call that forever changed my life and mind. The call that gave me a clean start and opened a world of eternal peace. I learned I would no longer be forced to live in a constant state of survival. The courage I will forever carry with me is now a reflection of what I've overcome, and a blessing in disguise. May 25th, 2022, at 32 years old, Chance took his last breath, and I took my first.



Untitled

Kason Adsit

Kelly Walsh High School

Cowboy ethics, and the way of the cowboy in general, is all about the quiet strength of an individual. This strength can be expressed in many different ways: strength of character, strength of mind, strength of ethics, and strength of body. When all of these parts come together, tough but compassionate people are born. They are the foundation upon which the rest of the world builds. I have been lucky enough to live among such great people, and they have demonstrated how cowboy ethics should be implemented. The cowboy ethic that has had the most impact on my life is to ride for the brand. This simple statement means so much: to always stay loyal, have pride in what one does, always do one's duty, and be dedicated. Riding for the brand is a mix of all these behaviors. It encompasses the feeling when one has a good home, a loving family, and great friends.

This feeling cannot be put into words; one has to experience it in order to understand. Perhaps the most important and memorable time that I saw riding for the brand put into use was when my sister was born. One of the greatest moments of my life was when I was told that I was getting a little sister. How my face must have looked when I learned that I was getting her— and how my face must have looked when I learned I might

not have her for very long. My sister was born with a genetic disorder called neurofibromatosis, specifically NF type 1. NF type 1 is a genetic disorder that causes tumors to grow on nerve tissue, and a mutation in the 17th chromosome in the human genome causes it. The 17th gene, also known as the NF1 gene, produces a protein called neurofibromin that helps regulate cell growth. The mutation that causes neurofibromatosis causes a loss in neurofibromin, and, therefore, allows cells to grow uncontrolled.

Before my sister was born, my family was very active and adventurous. We did most of our family bonding while outdoors. We would often go for hikes, take the dogs for long walks, or go camping. However, after my sister was born, things changed. She was born with a tumor in the sciatic nerve of her right leg and gluteus maximus, a tumor attached to her spinal cord in the middle of her back, a tumor on the optic nerve of her right eye, and a tumor on her brain stem. The combination of these tumors makes it difficult for my sister to be active. When she was really young, this was not a huge issue because she was little and we could carry her in a backpack. This solution inevitably failed when she got older, and it became impossible to carry her long distances. Due to this, my family began to go on our outdoor adventures less and less.

When I was younger, I resented my little sister for this change. I did not understand all of the facts about her condition, and I missed our family bonding outdoors. One could say that I was not riding for the brand. I was not loyal to my sister, and I did not do my duty to her. My parents, on the other hand, adapted and tried new ways that we could come together as a family, but I simply did not understand. My parents did as they always do and held to the cowboy ethics. They did not simply give up on her because of her condition. However, as I got older, I slowly began to see the full extent of my sister's plight. I tried to make an effort to do things that she wanted to do. It was slow at first, but eventually my sister and I began to grow closer. I saw the example that my parents were setting, and I began to emulate it.

Our family did end up adapting; in fact, it was quite ironic. The same disease that tore a hole in our family ended up being the thing that sewed it back

together. There is a large organization called the Children's Tumor Foundation, and its main goal is to raise money for the research of neurofibromatosis. My family ended up joining this organization, and as a result we met many amazing and strong people that suffered with the same disease as my sister. We traveled all over the country to places that were holding NF walks. All the traveling around and seeing all of the people truly opened my eyes to how bad my sister suffers with NF. I began to see that my family's discord was not my sister's fault: I was in the wrong for believing that in the first place. I no longer blamed my sister for my personal dissatisfaction, and I began to find ways that we could still bond despite her condition. I would help her with homework, play Barbies with her, and play her imaginary games. As a family, we began to play more board games because my sister loves them, and it was a fun way we could still bond. We joined the community around the country that suffers from the same disorder. They provided even more great examples of what it means to ride for the brand, and I was beginning to see how I could do it as well. I was beginning to take pride in my family again.

It took many long years, but my family began to grow even closer than before. At first, the addition of my sister added strife, anger, and distance to our family, but eventually she added so much depth, kindness, and generosity—making our family even stronger.

From this experience in my life I learned that we should find a group of people or a brand, and we should ride for them. After I saw the error of my thoughts and started to follow this cowboy ethic, my life and potential soared. I felt what it meant to truly belong to a group of people.

I learned how beneficial riding for a brand can be, so wherever I end up going, I will find my brand and ride for them.



Taking Pride In My Work

Branson Bankenbush
Sundance Secondary School

I was raised by a family that believed that your job is one of the most important things you would ever do in your life, and you should treat it as such. I did not have a significant amount of friends growing up, so I spent a majority of my time with my family. They taught me just about everything I would need to know to carry myself through my life. By the time I had entered elementary school, I had already obtained the drive to work hard on my assignments and keep myself busy, whether that was with an art project or a book. I continued to work hard at my academics, and quickly realized that I disliked idle time. School, although not enjoyed by most, was one of the things I thoroughly enjoyed as it kept me busy and entertained. Then, in the middle of my eighth grade year, the COVID-19 pandemic happened. To me, it was not so much an issue that I could not go out and do things, but an issue that I was running out of things to do at home. I had rearranged my room so many times that I was no longer able to remember what it had looked like at the beginning and had sharpened my colored pencils down to stubs. I quickly decided that I would need to occupy myself another way: by getting a job. I discussed it with my mother, and she told me that she thought it would be a good idea to do so. I applied for a job at Decker's Market as a carryout/ cashier. I was only 14 at the time,

so I was not sure if they would want someone so young. Fortunately for me, I got the job and started working excitedly. I faced shelves, cleaned the back, and helped customers with all the energy I could offer. I quickly was promoted to lead cashier at just 15 and became a primary closer. During that time I had really realized my drive to do the best that I could so I could be proud of my work. I dedicated so much of my time to my work, that I was working nearly 40 hours a week. I continued to work as much as I could on top of regular school hours, and I continued to be prideful in my work. At the beginning of 2022 the news came out that my father was starting his own business and would be gone for a majority of the time. Obviously this was not something that me and my family wanted to hear as it was going to make it very difficult for us to do things as a family, more difficult as it already was because of my work schedule. I continued to work as much as I could as I finished up my sophomore year, and just about a month before the end of school my father texted me to let me know that he would be home for a week. As much as I wanted to spend time with him, I did not want to take a week off from my work. I explained the situation to him, and he got very upset with me and made me feel bad for prioritizing my work. I thought to myself about it, and I remembered that he was the one that had always prioritized his work over us at times. He stayed late at work, went in early, worked on his days off, and spent more time at work than with us. I told myself that I would not let this bother me, and just to keep working. After that I started to realize that taking pride in my work did not have to cost me working my life away. I started to make more of an effort to spend time with my friends and family while still doing the best job that I could. By April of 2023 I had worked myself up the ladder as far as I could without becoming the manager. Aside from that, the work situation at the store was no longer enjoyable. People were not doing their jobs, and I had more to do than ever because of that. I was starting to find it difficult to maintain that level of excitement and pride I used to have in my work because I could not deliver the outcome I wanted for my tasks, so I decided to explore my options. I learned that there was an internship opportunity at Sundance State Bank, which I quickly and excitedly applied for. I received the internship and settled a schedule with my boss at Decker's so I would be able to work both jobs during the summer. I worked those 12 hour days for about a month and a half before I realized that I was not doing a job I was proud of at either of my jobs. I decided that it would be best if I focused on my job

at the bank, as it was the career path I planned to follow after graduation. Once I was able to focus primarily on my teller job, I began to enjoy it more, and was doing a job I was once again proud of. I worked full time during the rest of the summer, and once summer ended, I went back to work at Decker's. I had learned from my father that I needed to prioritize myself and my family, and not just my work. It is entirely possible to be proud of your work, keep yourself occupied, and still be able to spend time with the ones you love most. Currently I am anticipating graduation and am continuing to work at Decker's as a shift supervisor and bookkeeper, and will return proudly to the bank during the summer. Finding the balance between work life and personal life is one of the things you do not realize you need to do at a young age, because before you know it, your 15 year old self is working 40 hours a week, missing the core memories people have from school activities, and missing family functions. Being proud of your work does not mean you need to sacrifice your social life to cover a shift for someone because you feel bad for them. Being proud of your work is the ability to stand your ground to take care of yourself too. Because if customer service taught me anything, you have to have pride in yourself to have pride in your work, even if an old lady is yelling at you for not having roma tomatoes.



My Angels on Earth
Addison Bettinger
 Buffalo High School

I was perplexed as to how I stood around a dead, despairing, campfire in the midday heat, yet everyone else was still filled with hope and laughter. I was able to see all the families as they watched their kids live their best life, playing in the dirt and making new friends. In this situation, most normal kids would have any excuse not to make this experience fun, but these kids weren't normal. In fact, they are the most special, wholehearted kids I have ever met. Not because of the story that they are about to tell, but because of the choices that they make every day.

Every summer, my mom disappeared for a week, to somewhere I had never been able to fully sense out and understand until I experienced it. I had never been invited, but this summer something was different, I was older, more mature. I knew my mom was good with kids, and was always in charge of activities like duct tape projects, arts and crafts, scavenger hunts and face painting. Although I got the gist of what she did, I never quite understood the emotional part of the camp.

The agenda for the weekend was planned down to the minute. All the adults were supposed to supervise and make sure everything goes as planned, but like my mom my time was full of directing activities. The first hour was dedicated to the arrival of the families and designation of

cabins. I paced around the lodge anxious for everything to start. When the first car pulled down the gravel road, I started to feel my heart quicken. Two little girls came out of the car, followed minutes later with their mom and older brother. His legs struggled to help his body up to the stairs, the biggest smile plastered across his face. Right away my mom asked if he wanted to go into the lodge to play a board game, and it was like she asked him if he wanted to go to Disneyland. I followed them into the lodge, trying to fit in. Sitting down at the table we got out Candy Land, and he started handing out pieces, excited to start the game. We had to have been only about two spins in and he started to say that he had peed his pants. His tongue twisted around his words and his eyes couldn't meet my mom's. She was able to make him feel like it was not a big deal, and he smiled as they went right back out to find his mom. I was left in the lodge with the pee on the chair. I decided to clean it up myself and move on.

As soon as the clock hit noon I hurried towards the circle of people. It was hot outside, and everyone was trying to find shade. The firepit was empty, yet everyone was gathered around it. I recognized the family from the beginning of the arrival and came up behind them. My mom joined me as I stood there and the camp director began to talk. All of us leaders introduced ourselves before they began the annual map tradition. Each family came and stood by a giant map of Wyoming, placing a tiny dot showing where in the state they were from. Along with the flag, they got to tell their story. I will never be able to forget the mood of the families, as they shared such a sentimental piece of their lives.

*The first family:
 Mom, Dad, 1 Girl, 1 Boy (diagnosed with a Brain Tumor)*

*The second family:
 Mom, Dad, 2 Girls (oldest diagnosed with bone cancer)*

*The third family:
 Grandma, 1 Boy, 1 Girl (diagnosed with lymphomas)*

*The fourth family:
 Mom, Dad, 1 Girl, 3 Boys (youngest diagnosed with Leukemia)*

As the first mom was introducing her kids, she ceased to continue when she reached her youngest son. She held him gently in her arms, like a delicate piece of

glass about to break at any moment. Her eyes were locked into his and everyone was quiet, letting the moment take place. Her head slowly moved back to the anxious, glazed eyes, slowly letting her eyes break from his. Our eyes locked for a moment and I could see that they had become wide and shiny. Tears built up in the bottom of her eyelids, but like anything else you can't control they fell during the most unexpected moment. Her tongue was held back by emotions, as she tried to continue. The sting started in my nose, spreading like a wildfire, and I knew it was coming. I got a sting right on the bridge of my nose, and the feeling increased before it expanded. I feel it in my eyes like fresh cut onions, contaminating my senses. Then, as expected, it came all at once. Moisture built up, filling my eyelids until there wasn't any more room. I felt the heat as I looked up trying to blink it all away, but that only works for so long. I let it go and caught the first tear with the inside of my index finger. I couldn't stand to look at the vulnerable mother who stood in front of me, but I tried to hold it together and meet her eyes. She holds me in her grasp for only a second, smiling, holding back her tears. Then she continues on.

As the family sat back down and I listened to the rest of the stories I started thinking to myself. *What did that little boy do to deserve this burden? Why do I take my life for granted? Why is it him instead of me?* I couldn't answer my questions, but I poured my heart into the next couple days, trying to make it special for the amazing kids. I formed a special bond with the boy full of smiles and his adorable little sisters from the beginning of camp. They came up to me smiling every day, always ready for the next activity or adventure. I had painted their faces (special request of leopard and princesses), while they shared stories and giggled. I was their partner for the scavenger hunt, consisting of nature walks and piggy back rides. Their favorite thing was taking me to the bouncy house in between all the activities! At the end of the day, I don't know who had more fun, the kids or me!

After all the activities I became very attached to the families, and wasn't ready to leave. At the closing ceremony tears watered back into my eyes, as the same mom stood up and told a story. This time she was happy, completely grateful for the experience her family had. That was enough to make me realize how much this camp can mean to some people. This time around I sat by my new friends (other leaders' kids), so I was able to hold in my rush of emotions.

That night everyone said their goodbyes, but for most of the kids they didn't realize that this meant it was time to go home. A little girl came up to me and gave me a little angel on a keychain. She said I was her angel. It made me feel like the luckiest person alive, and it made it even harder to leave. The day after camp I competed in a golf tournament. The first day I had let my emotions get the best of me, thinking I had to do my best for all of the kids who aren't able too. Every time I messed up it got worse, because I thought I was letting them down. That next morning, I clipped the little angel to my bag, before getting ready for my round. I ended up playing my best round, and with such a good turn around I was able to take 3rd.

It was after the tournament when I was able to realize the impact those kids had on me. I was shown that even though they might have the hardest life, living in and out of hospitals, not walking, talking, or doing what they love: they are still able to smile. All weekend I was surrounded by the most loving, happy, grateful people, who could possibly have the worst life. I was shown the gift of life: the ability to smile, to do what you love, and be with the people you love. So when I think about all the times I have complained about doing the dishes, running in PE, or going to sports practice, I am completely embarrassed. After seeing all those kids, I feel like the luckiest person in the world to have the chance to do all of those things. I don't wish that was me, but now I do everything with love, compassion, and a smile just for the kids that don't have the chance. I have chosen to live every moment and opportunity with courage for all of the kids who don't have the chance to.

It is funny because about four months after camp I came through Casper with my family after a basketball game. We went to a sit-down restaurant, and happened to be sitting by the smiling boy and his family. When they saw my mom and I, they immediately lit up with excitement! We went over and talked to them, as they smiled and excitedly gave us hugs. The little boy sat with his eyes partly closed, listening to our voices, smiling. As soon as we started talking to him, he didn't want us to leave. After running into them at the restaurant I knew it was for a reason. Those kids are my angels on earth, reminding me to take every chance I get and live every moment with a smile. I now tell myself to live every moment with courage, for all the kids who don't get the chance.



Ignoring and Understanding Fear

Owen Calzada
Expedition Academy

One year ago, I was not the same person as I am now, and neither were any of us. Our past selves are the ones we learn from and reflect on to this day. When we use skills that we come upon from our life lessons, we adapt to become more independent. My life has endured multiple predicaments that were challenging to get over, and I was the one who had to adapt to those situations.

OCT 2021

During the initial months of 2022, I was losing my enthusiasm, and it seemed like my ability to move along in life was declining. I have always been more of a quiet kid, yet I would still like to be part of events and social gatherings. I started the school year off with decent attendance and good grades. However, as the school year progressed, I started to leave school whenever I could to go home and indulge in harmful activities such as marijuana. My home life was stressful and had a large part in these choices.

FEB 2022

After I had made these decisions, the school, parents, and probation office all believed that I needed

to fix these bad choices. The suggestion was that I be sent to rehabilitation and treated for conduct disorder and substance use disorder. Over the following months, we searched for the most suitable facility for me to attend. The final decision was to send me to Meadowlark Academy in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

JUL- AUG 2022

On July 21st, I was transferred from the Rock Springs Youth Home to Meadowlark Academy. When I first got there, I was not greeted with the warm welcome I was hoping for. Many of the kids there did not like me, and I felt highly neglected due to my sexuality. Of course, I had to deal with awkward and hateful situations. Yet I was not going to let others disturb my treatment and progress to be discharged from the Facility.

Once I had been at Meadowlark for more than one month, I was finally able to understand the dynamics there. A large number of the residents there were simply not good people for me to be around. These kids never knew how to set a good example and were not good influences. I realized that I was not going to succeed in a place like this if I was focused on the people there, rather than my treatment. I spent the next month and a half there putting in effort in my therapy. I learned how to stay out of drama and focus on myself more, rather than others. These are skills that I needed practice on and was not good at expressing.

However, while I was there, I felt as if I was not safe from the other residents. The unit I was in happened to be an all-boys unit and considering me being a homosexual, this created a large amount of issues. One night, when everyone had gone to bed, I was having a conversation with one of the residents right next to my room. He wanted to talk about my sexuality and how he felt about it. I could not have cared less about how he felt and told him to leave me alone and go to bed. However, he said to me that he wanted me to perform sexual acts on him. He came into the room after relentlessly told him to leave me alone. He forced himself on me, and I felt as if my entire world had shattered. I knew all my work there had been forced to a halt, and I could no longer progress there. When he finally left the room after fifteen minutes, I lay there awake for hours. I did not even feel like a person anymore as much as I did an object.

The next day, I had woke up and felt more scared than I have ever been before. Worry struck over me as everything was still the same as the day before, and I did not want what happened the previous night to repeat itself. I was so frightened and I knew that I did not feel protected from him. To secure my safety, I reached out to one of the staff that I felt safe with and communicated what had happened. A police investigation was initiated and the court had deemed it unsafe for me to stay there.

NOV 2022

This experience in my life had changed my life and the way I act in multiple ways. Even though I was taken advantage of I still knew that I need to focus on my life and do what has to be done. That being me getting sober and attending school. I learned how to be perseverant and push through every single affair that occurred over the last year. I believe that whatever happens in our lives there is always something positive to learn from it. Throughout the last year, I didn't know that I needed to view the positive side of things if I wanted to change. All of us still continue to grow and learn new skills to be a better person and succeed.



What a Long, Strange Trip

Graham Gilbert
East High School

I doubt most people have been guided or driven by these principles, at least not from first looking at this list and then choosing to live their lives based on this list. I have never seen this list of principles before, and I would assume the same for most of my peers. I myself believe talking less and saying more and remembering that not everything can be bought are significant values to embody to live a happy and fulfilled life. These ideas were cultivated from significant experiences in my own life, not some yuppie trying to sell a book about “cowboy ethics”. This essay will be centered around my own thoughts on value, growing up, and life because I really couldn’t care about his list.

The second week of my junior year a good friend of mine crashed his car and killed himself on accident. I learned then that death is sudden and absolute. There is no undo button. In the beginning death does seem partial, but only because it takes a long time to sink in and in that time you don’t really realize the person is dead. After you move past it you realize how sudden it was and how eternal the effects will be. That is the hardest thing I have ever gone through, though it taught me the most I have ever learned about life and value.

When someone dies you are left with many questions about why and how. It’s very hard to accept. You can’t realize all you have until its gone, it’s impossible to conceive. It’s impossible to imagine. Death is not a monetary system. You cannot buy someone back from death, you cannot pay not to

die. Death makes you reflect on what is valuable. I discovered that things that have value are things that are temporary, things uncontrollable. Things that cannot be bought, things that cannot be replaced. Emotions, ideas, and connections to other people can not be bought.

Growing up in general is quite an experience. You learn a lot. Its absurd and depressing, but also beautiful and wonderful. Bit by bit you are molded into a conscious mind and bit by bit you build your view of the world. It is scary. I try to not care what others think of me and in turn I try not to judge others. It is hard. Growing up is hard. Finding yourself is hard. I think I come off as a bum, a stoner, apathetic, and unamiable. And I may be some of all of those things. But in the end I don’t care because I don’t think what someone else thinks of me defines me. I think a person is more than just the superficial entity they present themselves to be. I think growing as a human is about becoming more than a list of values, I think its about becoming an individual, developing an identity.

Another thing about growing up is that people like to tell you what do or who you should be. Your parents, your coaches, anybody. I used to play soccer. I quit playing after my friend died. I think I quit because I didn’t really like being told what to do. When you play soccer, like most sports, when you don’t do what the coach wants they take you out of the game. Not doing what the coaches want isn’t really “riding for the brand”. I suppose I don’t really like “riding for the brand” in that sense. I also think I quit because I didn’t care. Coaches act like winning or losing is life or death. I couldn’t imagine being a grown man, having my livelihood dictated by boys playing a game. Winning or loosing is not life or death. It’s not that important of a matter. To me playing soccer could never be life or death. The only brand worth riding for is the brand you believe in. I guess I didn’t believe in their “brand”.

In the end growing up has taught me that people want you to “ride for the brand”, people want you to follow rules and imaginary lines, people are hypocritical. It seems to me most humans can only see value for things with prices, things they are told are valuable. Most humans waste their lives caring about worthless things but the overarching matter of wasting their whole life they are relatively fine with. I can’t do that. I believe in doing what you want, I believe in living to live. I think a lot of people can’t see life for anything more than money. I think those might be the same people who can’t see the forest for the trees. I hope to not be blinded. In the end I will be “rich” but it will have little correlation with the digits in my bank account.



Untitled

Tagr Holmes
Burns High School

As the quarterback called the play on a crucial third down, my mind raced with anticipation. I took a moment to visualize what the play would look like and what my role would be. My teammates hurried to get set as the referee started counting down. “Set... hut!” shouted the quarterback, and in an instant, my mind cleared, leaving me with a single thought. I stepped backward, dug my feet into the ground, and braced myself against the lineman rushing towards me. I threw my hands up and held my ground as my quarterback set his feet and launched a perfect spiral into the air. The football soared through the air, traversing 30 yards, before finally reaching the outstretched arms of our receiver. He leaped up, his eyes fixed on the ball, his fingers ready to wrap around it. The football flew through his flailing hands and fell helplessly to the ground. Our hopes of victory were dashed at that moment, leaving us with the bitter taste of defeat.

That was the story of my final season of high school football, a season that I had started with optimism but ended in disappointment. After just three games, I knew that our team was in for a long and difficult season. We had made the playoffs the previous year, and the thought of ending my high school football career on such a low note was discouraging. There were moments when

the thought of giving up on the team and abandoning the sport and friends that I had come to love crossed my mind.

But I didn’t quit. Instead, I dug deep and found the strength to keep going. Even though the season was tough and not what I had imagined, I played each game with all the intensity, effort, and heart I could muster. I tried my best to be a good leader and teammate to the other players.

Although our team finished the season with only one win and eight losses, I learned many valuable lessons. I took pride in playing for my team, even when we lost. I knew that I had given it my all, and that was something to be proud of. My teammates had done the same, and we had never stopped fighting, even when things got tough. I had also never given up and had learned the importance of following through on my dreams.

Looking back on that fall, I realize that it wasn’t the best season I ever had. But it was a season that taught me a lot about perseverance, determination, and never giving up. I discovered a lot about myself while playing on the field. I realized that with focus and determination, I can achieve great things, and I’m proud of the effort I put into supporting my teammates and myself.



Kindness and Courage

Josie Little

Saratoga High School

To have courage means to be strong in the face of fear, but living with courage means accepting fear and trying to be strong anyway. Now, you are probably thinking what kind of insane things happen during your junior year of high school, that a girl would desperately need courage. I'm not slaying dragons and fighting monsters like heroes in story books do, but in a way, I am. After all, aren't all stories and fairytales just a reality that is romanticized to teach morals and life lessons? So why can't high school be pictured as a fairytale? You can see the sweet English teacher as your fairy godmother, the mean girl in class as an evil queen, and the boy on the football team as your knight in shining armor. The point I am trying to make is that the lessons we learned in story books as kids are the same morals we should be applying in our lives. Kindness, patience and courage are the simplest of attributes on their own, but if people used them and applied them to their lives, they could accomplish great things. I don't need courage to slay dragons, but I do need it to spread kindness and forgiveness.

As a timid freshman on the volleyball team who was extremely introverted, I couldn't help but idolize the upperclassmen. I was engrossed by every little detail of them. I saw their talent and so desperately wanted

to learn their skills myself. Like in the books, My wide eyes soaked up every little thing that I could: their heart shaped sunglasses that they brought on bus trips, their favorite flavors of Gatorade, and their lucky game day hairstyles. I wanted to be just like them. The older girls were so amazing, athletic, and beautiful. They made conversation with such ease, and played sports with such confidence. I was shy and awkward and followed them around like a lost puppy most of the time. I loved the older girls immensely, but I was also a little terrified of them. As a shy fifteen-year old, I was grasping at any bit of courage I could, to try and keep up with them, to run with the big dogs. The girls had so much knowledge and experience that I desperately wanted too. Even though they intimidated me I still saw them as my mentors and listened to everything that they said. One day one of the older girls, the one I looked up to the most, pulled me aside and told me that she believed in me and knew that I had what it took to win that game. A couple of words of encouragement, in a desperate timeout of a game, gave me the confidence I needed to play with my full potential. The older girls didn't know it, but they were my mentors, guiding me along, until it was finally time for me to go off on my own and use everything that they had taught me. Like, in the books, they taught me their trade and trained me for battle. The little bit of courage they gave to me allowed me to play on the court with no hesitation and no fear of failing. Looking back on it now, I realize that I didn't idolize the upperclassmen because of their athletic ability or because of their beauty and cool sunglasses. I admired them because of their kindness, and their courage to express it. I looked up to them so much because of the sweet text messages, they would send me after games, because they would say hi to me in the hallways, and because they taught me lessons that make me who I am. They didn't know how much their small actions were impacting me, and contributing to who I truly am. Their beliefs and values have influenced and shaped the person I am now. I am not able to go on adventures and fight dragons on my own, but I am able to do so because of what my mentors taught me. Those older girls could quite possibly be the greatest blessing in my life because their bravery and kindness taught me how to be courageous and considerate.

Those older girls didn't just teach me how to be confident in my own abilities, but they also influenced me to be a kind hearted and thoughtful girl that the underclassmen could look up to. I've always been shy and

kept to myself. I was always a follower and never a leader. I looked up to other girls and tried to hang with them but I always followed one step behind. Now that I am older, the small selection of girls that I can hide behind is thinning. I'm beginning to realize that I am now the upperclassmen that the younger kids so dearly admire. My actions and decisions make more of an impact than I really know. I, of course, don't know who exactly is watching me with the same intensity and admiration I once did when I was little, but just the thought reminds me of the example I need to set. Ofcourse, I am just a kid, I make stupid mistakes, but whenever I am faced with a difficult decision that could take me down the wrong path, I think of the older girls I looked up to and the younger girls looking up to me now. I think of the girls that taught me how to be courageous and of the younger girls that are watching me choose, and I try to do the right thing. Just like in the stories, a young protagonist is often faced with the decision between good and evil. They must choose between the easy choice and the right choice. In the real world, these choices aren't monumental and world-ending, but they can still make great impacts. I want to be the hero that can face evil with a brave face. I try to be kind in cruel situations, I try to always forgive, and I try to do the best that I can each and every day. I'm not perfect. I make mistakes and fall down, but I always try to get back up and fight again. Facing evil and slaying dragons isn't easy, especially when you feel so meek, but you can conquer all, if you have kindness in your heart.

I haven't learned to be brave and independent by making big monumental decisions. I've never gone on adventures and quests to save the world from disaster. Instead, I've learned to live courageously, by taking small steps that make a huge impact. You don't have to slay a dragon or save a kingdom to become a hero. You can simply just be kind to strangers, express admiration to your friends, or say thank you for your blessings. I've seen the differences these actions do by watching the people I admire, and I've tried to make those actions habits of my own. I try to be courageous by being kind in a cruel world. I say hi to random people in the hallway and pass sweet notes to my friends that seem blue. Even though some people think I'm crazy and don't understand why I try to be so nice, I want to make a difference. The difference might be small, but the kindness in the gesture is what can make it great.

These small actions aren't necessarily an

accomplishment worth a gold medal, but they are still worth something. There's always people and obstacles that are going to make life extremely hard but I have felt the difference that the smallest bit of kindness makes. I know the power kindness can have and the bravery it takes to express it, but it is worth it. It might take courage to run with the big dogs, and to make decisions knowing they benefit others more than it does yourself, and it takes bravery to express kindness to other people. Life isn't necessarily a fairytale. There's evil and darkness and not always a happy ending, but we can better the world if we live with the courage to change it.



Always Do The Right Thing

Addison Marcy

Rock Springs High School

The seven year old girl gets woken up for her day. She slept in between the comfort of her mother and father; possibly a bit too old for this, but it's the way it has always been. It's their normal. Last night she recalls her dad coming to her moms side of the bed, sitting on the ground, and trying to talk with her, or maybe fight, but the girl isn't really sure. This happens a lot. It's their normal. In fact, it was so normal that nothing felt wrong to the girl. Her biggest worries were learning simple multiplication and what she'd play at recess that day with her friends. She thought her family was happy, but she was wrong. A big change was soon to occur that would affect her life forever.

That seven year old girl is me, now 16 and nearing 17. The memories and the hurt of my parents' separation never did leave me and I don't predict they ever will, but as I've grown I can see the situation differently. Nearly a decade has passed, each new year teaching me more about feelings. Feelings that everyone has. When my parents first split I resented them. Especially my mom for being the one to leave. Why would they put their child through this? Why would she leave him? Couldn't they try to fix this? I now see the courage they had to make the decision to walk away from each other.

I believe most people in this world have a dream that one day they will have the perfect life. They'll have their dream job, dream person, dream house, and dream family. Their lives will be filled with so much happiness, and they will never have any issues. I'm sure my parents had this dream too. They had each already failed at that dream once. My dad was married and had three children, two girls and a boy. It ended with divorce and his kids having to choose which parent they'd live with. My mom had a son with a man while in college, and quickly they were not together. Years went by and eventually my parents met through mutual friends. They seemed perfect for each other. They both had children, grew up around agriculture, and loved the sport of rodeo. It was their second shot at their perfect life. Like many couples though, they had issues. To this day I'm not sure when the issues started or what all of their issues were. I just know they had them. I also now know that no matter the problems, it couldn't have been easy for my mom to leave. This would be the end for what she thought was her second chance at a perfect life. She would be failing to stay with the father of her child for the second time. She would be leaving the man she loved and had built a life with. She would have to find a place for her and her kids to go before finding her own place. At the time, I had so much anger at her for this decision to leave, but now I am beyond proud of her. Such strong courage was needed to know that the right choice was to step away even when there were so many things that could point her against this difficult decision.

My mom was not the only one who has shown me immense courage from this situation. While she was the one to walk away, it was my father that I could see and can still see improving himself. Soon after their split, he began a journey to find God. He started attending church and praying each night. When it was my time with him, I would attend church as well and each night when he would be tucking me in we would pray together. I'd never experienced this before and even though it was something very different, it was something I really enjoyed. I look back and admire him so much for this. We live in a small town where everyone knows everyone. I can only imagine how people talked when he walked into that church for the first time. Not only did he have the community to make this difficult, but also his own family. My family was never religious and to this day they will still crack little jokes about the time that he went to church. Knowing that even

the people who were supposed to support him during this difficult time made jokes and comments just makes me recognize his courage even more. Even though he doesn't go to church anymore, the experience has made a major impact on me and reminds me often to strengthen my own relationship with God.

I have many things that I can admire my dad for, but the thing that will always mean most to me is the continuous love that he has. My dad and my mom's son were always extremely close. Even though he was not biologically his, my dad still thought of him as his son. He had been in his life from a young age and had a big role in raising him. When my parents separated, I wasn't sure what was going to happen with them, but they kept a relationship. One of my most special memories was seeing my dad attend my brother's wedding. It brought me much joy to see him there supporting my brother but also pain. The time had come for the mother-son dance. While all eyes were on my mom and brother, or almost all eyes, my dad carried one of the most hurt expressions that I have ever seen. I watched him slip out of the venue with his head hung low, not being able to bear to watch. While I don't know exactly what he was thinking in that moment, I can assume that from his eyes he was seeing the people that were supposed to be with him forever. The people that were meant to be part of his perfect life. That day it didn't surprise me at all that my dad came to be there on my brother's big day.

I now see how much courage it must've taken for him to come. To come and sit in a random section of seating at the ceremony when once he would have imagined a front row seat with the rest of his family. To come to a wedding moments before it started that he would have spent days preparing for. I look up to my dad so greatly for this. Even though it was hard he found the strength and showed up because it was someone that he loved. To some it may have seemed weird that he showed or that he was even invited, but I know to my brother and father both it meant the world. My dad has made mistakes in his life; I'm sure more than I could ever know, but he has shown me the importance of being compassionate and trying so hard to keep those people you love in your life even when it takes a lot of courage to do so.

To this day I still dream of having my own perfect life even though I've seen how that can fail. What I've learned is that even when what you believed was going

to be your perfect life turns out not to be, it's going to all be okay. You may go through a lot of hurt and cause others hurt as well, but eventually the pain eases and it can be seen how it was all for a reason. My pain is still there deep down, but it is nothing like what it was many years ago. I've grown and seen how my parents have so much joy in their new lives and know that this was how it was supposed to be. Both of my parents have shown me to have courage each in their different ways. They've shown me that I need to have courage to make the tough decisions I'll face in my life. They've shown me that when something hurts me and doesn't go as I'd imagined, to push through anyway. For a long time I feared the future because of their story, but now I know I can get through anything as long as I remember the courage they've taught me. There was a time that I was embarrassed at my parents not being together. Now all I feel is pride to be their daughter. They might not have been together to raise me, but it is the combination of them both that has built me.



Making Peace with the Past

Maycee McKim
Riverside High School

The seven year old girl gets woken up for her day. She slept in between the comfort of her mother and father; possibly a bit too old for this, but it's the way it has always been. It's their normal. Last night she recalls her dad coming to her moms side of the bed, sitting on the ground, and trying to talk with her, or maybe fight, but the girl isn't really sure. This happens a lot. It's their normal. In fact, it was so normal that nothing felt wrong to the girl. Her biggest worries were learning simple multiplication and what she'd play at recess that day with her friends. She thought her family was happy, but she was wrong. A big change was soon to occur that would affect her life forever.

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My mom was not the only one who has shown me immense courage from this situation. While she was the one to walk away, it was my father that I could see and can still see improving himself. Soon after their split, he began a journey to find God. He started attending church and praying each night. When it was my time with him, I would attend church as well and each night when he would be tucking me in we would pray together. I'd never experienced this before and even though it was something very different, it was something I really enjoyed. I look back and admire him so much for this. We live in a small town where everyone knows everyone. I can only imagine how people talked when he walked into that church for the first time. Not only did he have the community to make this difficult, but also his own family. My family was never religious and to this day they will still crack little jokes about the time that he went to church. Knowing that even

the people who were supposed to support him during this difficult time made jokes and comments just makes me recognize his courage even more. Even though he doesn't go to church anymore, the experience has made a major impact on me and reminds me often to strengthen my own relationship with God.

I have many things that I can admire my dad for, but the thing that will always mean most to me is the continuous love that he has. My dad and my mom's son were always extremely close. Even though he was not biologically his, my dad still thought of him as his son. He had been in his life from a young age and had a big role in raising him. When my parents separated, I wasn't sure what was going to happen with them, but they kept a relationship. One of my most special memories was seeing my dad attend my brother's wedding. It brought me much joy to see him there supporting my brother but also pain. The time had come for the mother-son dance. While all eyes were on my mom and brother, or almost all eyes, my dad carried one of the most hurt expressions that I have ever seen. I watched him slip out of the venue with his head hung low, not being able to bear to watch. While I don't know exactly what he was thinking in that moment, I can assume that from his eyes he was seeing the people that were supposed to be with him forever. The people that were meant to be part of his perfect life. That day it didn't surprise me at all that my dad came to be there on my brother's big day.

I now see how much courage it must've taken for him to come. To come and sit in a random section of seating at the ceremony when once he would have imagined a front row seat with the rest of his family. To come to a wedding moments before it started that he would have spent days preparing for. I look up to my dad so greatly for this. Even though it was hard he found the strength and showed up because it was someone that he loved. To some it may have seemed weird that he showed or that he was even invited, but I know to my brother and father both it meant the world. My dad has made mistakes in his life; I'm sure more than I could ever know, but he has shown me the importance of being compassionate and trying so hard to keep those people you love in your life even when it takes a lot of courage to do so.

To this day I still dream of having my own perfect life even though I've seen how that can fail. What I've learned is that even when what you believed was going

to be your perfect life turns out not to be, it's going to all be okay. You may go through a lot of hurt and cause others hurt as well, but eventually the pain eases and it can be seen how it was all for a reason. My pain is still there deep down, but it is nothing like what it was many years ago. I've grown and seen how my parents have so much joy in their new lives and know that this was how it was supposed to be. Both of my parents have shown me to have courage each in their different ways. They've shown me that I need to have courage to make the tough decisions I'll face in my life. They've shown me that when something hurts me and doesn't go as I'd imagined, to push through anyway. For a long time I feared the future because of their story, but now I know I can get through anything as long as I remember the courage they've taught me. There was a time that I was embarrassed at my parents not being together. Now all I feel is pride to be their daughter. They might not have been together to raise me, but it is the combination of them both that has built me.



**Try To Enjoy Life As Much
As Possible**
Malayna Paxton
South High School

“Try to enjoy life as much as possible.”

That’s what my mom told me on our car ride back home. Her advice hadn’t necessarily registered, but I nodded my head, taking a sip of my fizzy sprite and jotting her words down in my notebook. She tried to elaborate, but it didn’t connect with me, life’s just not something you enjoy, I thought. Life is a chore, you get up, do work, eat enough to keep you running, and do more work, but I kept my thoughts to myself. Her words were pretty, but at the time I didn’t believe them, I didn’t realize just how much I needed to hear them.

Looking back on it, I don’t know why I asked her for advice, maybe I wanted to fill up my journal with sweet quotes, and fragments from my life. Or maybe, somewhere a little deeper down, I was lost. Looking for some form of maternal guidance that I was too shy to ask for. Regardless of whatever reason propelled me to take notes of segments of conversations, I took home my notebook, and shoved it back into its drawer, forgetting it was even there.

It wasn’t until later on that summer, that something clicked. My cousin passed, I wasn’t close with her, we barely saw each other given the fact that she was in her early twenties, and our lives never had much room to cross. But

there was still a level of confusion laced with hurt that someone so young was gone, and the loss rocked our family. Everyone flew in for the funeral, family I only saw once every few years gathered in the church. It was somber, muffled sobs and frozen faces battling to find some comfort in the verses the preacher muttered. In the short few hours at her funeral, I felt like I got to know her better than I’d ever gotten to know her in her life, and that shook me.

There was one thought that stuck in my head, replaying like a broken record. If she died, so young, so unexpectedly, it could happen to anyone. It could happen to me. As eerie as it was to think about, it was true. And the prospect that I could lose everything, and the only trinkets left of my life would be trophies that meant nothing to me, or perfect scores that would die in a paper shredder. That idea haunted me, the fact that all there was to look back on was this static, robotic-like girl, whose only characteristic was her perfect scores.

I think that was the moment something shifted, walking out of the funeral I started to notice more. The sky was as crisp as the cold hitting into my blushed cheeks, a brown fence wrapped around the lot, a few birds perched on top of it. As nuanced as it was, I felt appreciation for life, I looked around at the world and saw a place full of potential, memories to be made, smiles to be had, even the saddest moments like today, were, in some twisted way, beautiful. Nothing hurts if you don’t care about it, that’s the beauty in life, all of this pain meant that there was something so special underneath it all.

This aspect of freedom I was craving, was something I found first in camping. This feeling of being somewhere so far away but so close. Nostalgia crept in through the smell of sunscreen sticking to my skin, and the sound of a jet ski whirling and blowing up little pellets of water. Jumping off a thirty-foot ledge into icy cool water, was the exhilaration I’d been missing. The invincibility I felt might have been misguided, but it didn’t matter, because for the first time I allowed myself to fully submerge into this world of excitement.

The rest of that summer was different. I took my notebook out of the dresser and re-read it and this time I listened. I started to do things that I liked. I went out with friends, watched movies, went camping, I made memories that meant something to me. And it felt good, I felt like a real person, I didn’t feel lost anymore.

On another late-night drive, music blasting through the speakers, a fizzy sprite in one hand and a half-eaten taco in the other, I turned to my mom, “I get it now,” I said, she looked at me confused, “why you told me to enjoy life. I understand.” She didn’t say anything, she just held my hand and kept driving.



A Bright Light
Paxton Philpott
Burglington High School

Everyone needs someone in their life that makes them laugh, that smiles at them when they are having a bad day, and can be there when you need someone to talk to. For me, that person is my sister. She always has been. She is always so happy and energetic and lights up any room she goes in. My sister is there for me on the days I need her most. There was never a time I couldn’t rely on her. They say sisters are inseparable. They are like your best friend. They give you courage even on your worst days. In my life, I have always found this true for me.

Seven years ago, when she was just in Kindergarten, my sister was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease. She had been very pale and didn’t have nearly as much energy as usual. My parents took my sister to get a blood test at the doctor, where they found out her hemoglobin levels were very low. So, they sent her to the Saint Vincent’s hospital in Billings. They took a scope there, and that’s when she was diagnosed. Ever since then, she has had flare ups that last about a week or so, and infusions every month.

Throughout my life I have watched the relationships I held onto fall apart. People in my life left, which made me feel alone, like I had no one to rely on. How could someone ever make me feel that way? I had to make different decisions than that. How could I be the one to cause that pain for anyone I

loved? I decided then and there that I was going to continue the relationships I had. I couldn’t ever be the one to give up on someone. I learned how to be that someone I had always needed for others. I learned to do this by being like my sister. It sounds funny, following my younger sister’s example, but it’s true. She was the one that lifted me up when I had a bad day. My sister was always there for me. She never fell away. She cherished our relationship as much as I did.

Through my sister’s smiles and laughs she always brightened my day, but as we both became older, she started to have a harder time with both her disease and other hard times in her life. We were always together and shared our trials. When our mom left, our dad got remarried, and we had stepsiblings become a part of our lives. My sister struggled a lot with all these things being thrown at her, while still trying to manage her disease. Sometimes at night I would hear her cry, and because I knew exactly how she felt, I was able to comfort her and hug her until she could fall asleep. Because she had taught me how I can help others and be there for them, I learned how to be there for her. Even little things that don’t seem that important. I couldn’t ever take any of the hard things in her life away, but I could be there for her and go through things with her. Like when she would come home from school crying because she felt excluded from her friends. That night, I watched our favorite movie with her, which we’ve only seen about a million times, in my bed eating frozen blueberries. Because I wanted to be that someone for everyone else, I could be there for my sister no matter what she was struggling with. And now my sister and I are closer than ever because we have both been able to be that someone for each other.

Thomas S. Monson once said, “Ours is the responsibility to keep our light bright for others to see and follow”. This truth has changed the way I interact with everyone I meet. It has taught me to be the type of person everyone can rely on. In my life I have learned the difference between good relationships where people have been there for me, and not so strong relationships where people I love don’t want anything to do with me. From these experiences, and the people involved in them, I have learned how to be a “light” for everyone that needs one. Although I have had hard things in my life and relationships that have fallen apart, I wouldn’t change anything I have been through because it has taught me how to help others through what they are going through.



What Lies Behind the Shadows

Elizabeth Sanzon
Wyoming Girls School

“Your grandpa would have disowned you too.” “We saved you from the abuse you were going through.” “You are not going to therapy. Not for you to lie about my son to a therapist and get him in trouble.” “I don’t blame you for being a sociopath, but show some remorse for what you accused my son of.” “My son won’t even come visit me anymore while you’re here.” “No male in this family wants to be left alone with you.” “I spend money on you!” “My son would never touch someone like you.” “This is a f*ck you punishment.” “I decided to take you out of swimming, maybe now you would stop lying about my son.” “What are you saying to your school counselor?” “You walk around as if you’re the victim.” “I’m putting cameras up because we can’t trust you around my son.”

These are some of the many things my aunt said to me after finding out what I wrote about her son sexually assaulting me. I had no choice but to remain silent. I was afraid of telling anyone about what my cousin did to me because I was told that I would be the one in trouble. My family did not want to hear any truth behind what actually happened between me and my cousin. They live in denial, perhaps because they do not want to face any truth. In public, my family always made it seem like we were a happy family, but behind closed doors, there was emotional and mental abuse that nobody would ever know... until I did what had to be done, I had to be courageous.

I have been told I am trustworthy, resilient, honest, blunt and charming. I am forced to spend most of my days

wrapping my head around why my family has abandoned me.

Surely, they did not believe in the stories he told. Surely, they must have noticed these enormous gaps every time he told his side, right? How can they live in the shadows of the truth? Some part of me is 100 percent sure they know that I am not the one lying. Why are they pretending to be liars in this crime? I felt so unsafe. I felt torn by my family. I felt burdened daily. Each day, I endured punishment for undeserved faults.

I stopped eating. I always felt sick. I started to fail in all of my classes. I no longer focused on my life. I walked around with a fake smile on my face, but deep down, I wanted someone to hear my silent screams, and my family was treating me like I was the predator in their home.

I lacked the courage to address my home situation. I wasn’t ready. I was not ready until my mother came home. However, it was difficult to speak. My mother was furious when I told her what happened, and one thing led to the next cops in our new apartment talking to me and gathering up my clothes for evidence. I went down to the police station to tell my story. “They will always believe him and never you.” I was told this many times over. Surely do they would believe me right?

I stayed up for some nights waiting for them to call my mom... they never did. I was mentally drained, suicidal. There were cuts up and down on my body and goodbye notes in my drawer. I wanted to live, but I did not want to live with the pain anymore. The pain of losing my family was unbearable; I wanted them to believe me, and I wanted them to come back. I tried to reach out, but I never got an answer from them. I felt alone.

Sometimes, you want to keep something secret, even though it is bad. Be courageous and speak the truth. Sometimes, the cost of the truth can cost you everything you love, but it is better to do the right thing than to hide behind the shadows. The cost of my honesty was my family, and even though I miss them with everything in me, I did not want to live in denial like they do. I followed my own moral compass and received both agreement and disagreement. Honesty is one of my best qualities, and a small white lie might seem harmless to the naked eye, but it can cause destruction.



Untitled

Ethan Van Why
Prairie View Community School

I am a strong believer that not everything is for sale. Some things are worth more than money can buy. Different people have different things that they know are not for sale. For some, it is family heirlooms such as books or artifacts. For me, it is a different type of family heirloom.

My great-great-grandparents immigrated from Germany to Wyoming during the Homestead Act in the late 1800s. They built a house, barn, and several outbuildings by hand. Most of the buildings that they originally built are still standing today. Once they had their home built they started ranching. There were many others in the area who had started to homestead but eventually moved away or failed. As people were leaving their homesteads, the land went up for sale at very low prices. My great-great-grandparents took this opportunity to expand their ranch piece by piece. They passed down the ranch to their daughter, my great-grandma. My great-grandpa’s family also had a ranch in the area, so when they got married they merged the land. They passed the ranch to my grandma and grandpa who still run the ranch today.

My family ranch has been in my family for over 100 years. There have been struggles and hard times, but my family has prevailed. With the land being in one

family’s possession for this long, you could assume that there have been countless offers by others to buy parts of it. Nevertheless, no one has sold anything because it is more valuable than money alone. The land has been the livelihood of my family. We have cared for the land and used it wisely so that it will still be healthy and useful for generations to come.

With all of the urban expansion going on, especially North of Cheyenne, I assume it is only a matter of time before it starts getting close to my family’s land. I have seen countless farms and ranches, especially in Colorado that have been taken over by urbanization. Where there used to be luscious wheat and corn fields there are brand new houses. Where there used to be green pastures for cattle, there is a new mall.

Even so, I still believe that our land is more valuable than money can buy. My family rotates the cattle between pastures all year to prevent overgrazing. In the summer I am constantly helping my grandpa with fencing to make sure that the cattle stay in their pastures. We check cows every day to make sure that none of them are sick or hurt or if they are we can doctor them. In the harsh winters, we still have to go out in the snow and wind to feed the cattle and to break the ice so that they have access to water. In the spring, when there is bad weather during the calving season, we bring the newborn calves into the shed so that they will not freeze or get sick.

Every year in the fall we bring the calves to the sale barn. When my grandparents sell the calves it is their only paycheck for the year. My family takes pride in our work every day so that we can continue to do what we do. Over the years my family has put blood, sweat, and tears into the land, and I think that that is much more valuable than any amount of money can buy.



Untitled
Natalie Stoll

Arvada-Clearmont High School

I think about you often. I think about those days spent at the park, the sun beating down on me as I yell “Watch this!”. I think about you sitting in the shade, smiling at me, reminding me not to get hurt. I think about walking home, to stand on a chair next to you while you sifted through your recipes. We spent countless days like this in Laramie and, being only 5, I didn’t realize how much I would cherish these simple moments all these years later. For as long as I can remember, my Grandma Reeda was a joyous, loving person. We’d spent countless hours together coloring and walking to the park across the street. Making dinner was always my favorite though. I would run through and around the kitchen, stopping only to look over the counter, always asking to try whatever was in the works that night. Spaghetti was my favorite, and I insisted on her making it every year for my birthday, which she gladly did, always calling me over to the stove to help check if the sauce needed anything

As I went into fifth grade, I started sports. Being a nervous kid, I was terrified. What if I lose us the game? What if my coach yells at me during a time out? What if my team doesn’t think I’m good enough? After my first game, I ran up to my grandma sitting in the stands. She wrapped her arms around me as I wriggled away, complaining that I was still sweaty. She took my hands

and looked at me. “I’m so proud of you Natalie. You’re so brave, you know that?” I smiled at her, feeling proud of myself. She recognized that although playing in a middle school basketball game was no huge feat, it had felt like one for me. She continually reminded me of this and always made sure I knew I was more than capable.

Years flew by, and soon I was in eighth grade. My Grandma had always seemed untouched by time. Her face and smile always the same. This year was no different. When I heard she had been feeling sick, I figured it was the same as any other cold she’d had. One morning I overheard my mom talking on the phone. “I need to take her in”, she was saying, “I think it’s serious.” This was my first clue, but I paid little attention, as I was struggling immensely in school, and stayed busy with sports and friends. Days later, my mom informed me my sister and I were staying the night at my Aunt’s while she went up to the Billings hospital with my Grandma. No big deal though, right? I put on a smile for my little sister, 9 at the time, and told her we could grab fast food for dinner and sleep together on the pullout couch.

On March 20th, several weeks after hearing my mom on the phone, we went to visit our beloved Grandma Reeda in Montana. Beforehand, we went to lunch. My mom and dad sat across from my sister and I as we ate quietly. I had only taken a couple bites of my sandwich when my mom looked at us each in turn. We stared at her expectantly before she told us that Grandma had lung cancer. “Maybe this was more serious than the doctors first thought” she finished with. As we rode to the hospital, I tried not to think about it. As we walked in, I spotted her sitting with her daughter in the foyer. She looked just like she always did, down to the small charm necklace regularly resting on her shirt. My Grandma smiled at us and asked what we brought her. As I handed her the sandwich, she opened her arms for a hug like always. We caught up and ate like normal. This wasn’t so bad, I thought, maybe I’m scared for no reason, she’ll get better. Soon after this visit, Grandma Reeda was moved back to the hospital in Sheridan. We texted regularly and although I wasn’t allowed to go to prom until the following year, my Grandma made sure I sent her a picture of every dress I saw. We discussed them, and she told me that next year she couldn’t wait to see me because she already knew I’d be the prettiest.

However, sitting in the waiting room a short week later, I tried not to cry. It was getting worse. Fast, they said. We had to go see her. I counted the glossy tiles on the floor as I walked to her room with my dad and sister, led by a doctor. When we reached her room, I thought we had gone into the wrong one. This empty frame of a person could not be our Grandma Reeda. I didn’t want to look at her. “Mom,” my dad said, “Ella and Natalie are here to see you.” She hardly responded as I walked slowly over, looking down at my hands. I hugged her twice as she laid there, not even able to embrace me like she always would. Standing for a moment, I choked out “I love you” and walked quickly away, my face hot and eyes burning. I didn’t want to remember her like that. Two days later I woke to the news that she had passed. I couldn’t even cry. Foolishly, I thought of who would make my birthday dinner every year. Who would hug me after my games and tell me I was brave? Who would help me pick out my dress? The rest of the week went by in a haze. Everyone apologizing like it would help anything. I felt sick. One morning as I laid in bed, trying to gather the strength to get up for school, I thought about the weeks before her death. I had not once seen my Grandma seem discouraged. It was clear now that she knew too. She had come to terms with the fact that maybe she wasn’t going to be able to do all the things we had in mind, and she had been brave. I got up, thinking about how privileged I was. She had lived every day, including her last weeks, with courage. Over the years, she had instilled her values into my life through steady reassurance and the constant modeling of spirit. Now it was my turn. I had an entire life ahead of me. I couldn’t choose whether I got to live it with her, but I knew I could live it for her.



Take a Penny, Leave a Penny

Casey Toner

Glenrock High School

Take a penny, leave a penny. We have all seen it, the blue plastic containers influencing you to toss in your loose change on every gas station counter spanning the United States. This change for change program makes you feel like a better person and helps the next person missing a penny for the bag of funions purchase it even though they came up a little short. Some of us pay it no mind, some of us make an effort to always leave a penny behind, however, it's hard to ignore when the saying is written upon a tattered piece of cardboard propped delicately against a homeless person's legs as he rests against a red brick wall.

Walking down any street in the United States, you are bound to come across a loose penny on the ground. If you're anything like me, you have the stipulation that the only good penny on the ground is one that is heads up, tails up? Flip it over and leave it for the next person to pick it up. However, on this day my luck landed a penny heads up on the dingy sidewalk of downtown Denver on my way to the first day of a convention. This convention is highly competitive with just over 8,000 members in attendance; it's nothing to sneeze at. As the sea of red (our Organization's chosen color) filled the room, the murmur rose to a gentle roar, then absolute screaming, as our

National officers crossed the stage welcoming us and kicking off our National Convention. After the excitement of the opening session, the 6pm ending time started to kick in, and hunger hit us all. My chapter and I chartered our way to a local pizza place, mostly by the scent, but also by Google Maps. As we arrived and found ourselves sitting in the booth surrounded by fellow convention attendees, all of our nerves settled, and we folded into the laughter and chatter of the restaurant.

We placed our orders and began to share our thoughts and worries of the next day's worth of contests, workshops, and other goings. Shortly after the conversation began and on perfect cue the pizzas came out in a delicious combination of gooey, cheesy, savory toppings and a crispy crust. As we enjoyed our meal, the penny burned a hole in my pocket, and I reflected on the power of small gestures—like leaving a penny for the next person or sharing a pizza with friends. We finished our meal and walked out with enough leftovers to feed a small army; that's when the doom set in... we had no microwave in our hotel room. While I'll eat anything, I decided cold pizza was not something I wanted to eat. Now the group had a collective problem: what to do with our leftovers? We did not want to just chuck it, so we decided to start our journey down the sidewalk and decide before we hit the hotel.

Denver is not your regular city; its home to 716,256 people, 9,065 of that population being homeless—one of the highest in the United states. In comparison, that's just under 4 Glenrock, Wyomings put together. We saw this first hand as we continued our walk down the street, after a brief look at one another the decision was agreed upon, give back. The first two people looked at us surprised that we acknowledged their presence and gleefully accepted the food, the other two of our party opted to donate it to a single man who had man's best friend with him. Both the gentleman and the pup looked like they hadn't eaten in days, at least by the ribs we could see through the man's thin shirt. We continued our walk down the street feeling good for what we had just done. I saw him before anyone else had, and I still can see him if I close my eyes. He had on a dirty plaid jacket, a gray t-shirt and blue jeans that were so badly worn that gray had taken over most of the blue. He was resting against the warm red bricks of a building, his used styrofoam cup and makeshift sign sitting parallel to his legs. It wasn't until I

got closer and read the sign that I understood why his cup was so full. It read in all black letters "Take a penny, Leave a penny."

During this simple interaction of reading the sign and reflecting within myself, I couldn't shake the contrast between the casual exchange of loose change at gas stations and the vivid image of a homeless person with a makeshift sign. The difference between the carefree convention atmosphere and the harsh realities of life outside the convention center was a sharp reminder of the diverse experiences coexisting in the same city. It's often said it's money that makes the world go round, however from a Wyoming-ight's view, I believe it is kindness and not money. This brings us together as a community, giving a little kindness when we can and taking a little when we need it. Remember that penny? While a rather small and careless gesture, I dropped that penny into his cup adding to the growing stack already within. In Wyoming, we are rather lucky, luckier than some care to see and that's why I've chosen to live by this simple phrase "when you have more than you need, build a longer table not a higher fence." This phrase encompasses the idea of giving a little when you can.

I ask you not to read this essay and think it's on how to stop the homeless problem, while it is a problem that needs help, in a world already unkind, where destructive forces are actively at play, it becomes crucial for individuals, especially the younger generation, to recognize the untapped resource within our grasp – kindness. As a 17 year old with access to the internet and social media, my peers and I see first hand that the constant pursuit of perfection is poisoning the earth we all must live on and destroying it day after day. A world without kindness is one like ours where no one has made a motion to change and the 21st century students stand on the sidelines silenced by our age. So, to those who read this, I ask you to make a change not just for our sake but the world's sake, when you have more than you need, build a longer table not a higher fence: take a penny, leave a penny. Now, I'm not asking you to go out back and grab some loose boards and a fresh rendition to your dinner table. I'm asking you to take that extra 30 seconds you have a day and ask someone how they are and embrace that feeling. We often disregard kindness in our day to day life as we get caught up in a work-eat-sleep routine. This essay stands as a call to action to those who don't

stand on the sidelines along with us. It's time to break the routine and add a little kindness for those who need it. Take a penny, leave a penny...

Work Cited: United States Census Bureau. "Census.gov." Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, www.census.gov/.



Courage that Shaped Me

Kayden Tucker

Torrington High School

I've been through a lot with my siblings growing up; things that most kids don't often experience throughout childhood. My siblings are some of the greatest people I have had as role models. As you read this, you may ask how they've guided me based on the events I speak about. It's simple really. I learned from all the wrongs and mistakes they've made, but most importantly: they provided me with knowledge, strength, and a bursting passion of courage in my character.

Growing up I watched my siblings' flaws and mistakes form into shape. Being the youngest out of four isn't as easy as people make it seem. You may hear things like the youngest gets their way, the youngest is the favorite, the youngest never gets in trouble. In all reality it is dreadful. I not only watched my siblings leave one by one but also had to watch them change throughout the time we all had together. The darkest days I have embedded into my brain. For some reason it is hard to remember good times. When talking about my siblings leaving, my mind is flooded with the distressing things I saw growing up. I'm not saying we didn't have good times, because we definitely did. It's just that traumatic events that happen are the things that are remembered most and not forgotten.

One of the first big changes that happened was my brother leaving. He and my oldest sister share a different birth mother, so they only spent weekends with me and my other sister. We were seven years apart, so it was rare we'd get along. We didn't share the same interests, but he always tried. He taught me how to play the dumb video games that he loved and would share the most random and spontaneous fun facts he knew. I was always ready for the weekends to come around just for those silly things and the quality time with my brother. That was until one night my brother got caught sneaking out. My brother struggled with drug and alcohol abuse from the early age of eleven. I never saw these problems. Then again, I was only the ripe age of eight, and I wasn't "old enough" to be informed of them. One night out of nowhere, I heard my dad start to yell. I remember running into my closet, hiding, not knowing what was going on. My parents gathered me and my sisters in the living room and explained that my brother wasn't in the house and that he had snuck out to purchase cigarettes. Suddenly, my mom opened the door, grabbing my brother by his shirt and pulling him through the threshold. I was confused and at a loss for words. My brother was fifteen at this time and I didn't believe my parents because he could do no wrong in my eyes. I felt like the breath had been taken out of my lungs and I couldn't speak. All I wanted to do was hug him and hold him tight. I might have been eight, but I knew the next step wouldn't be pretty, and that one of my siblings wasn't going to be around anymore. My brother walked upstairs with a garbage bag in hand that held all of his belongings. That was the first time I cried my eyes dry, but I knew I had to be strong and have courage to get through.

My oldest sister was like another mother figure to me. Having her around was the highlight of my childhood. On the weekends when she was over, we'd have our sleepovers. Even with the five-year age gap, that never stopped her from participating in everything I wanted to do. After her games, she would always come home and stay up with me no matter how tired she was. She would listen to all the gossip I had from ages eight to fifteen and would share the best advice and lessons learned. In all my extra activities I did, I wanted to be just like her. I used the same numbers in sports, worked hard to be in the same positions, but never quite grasped the strong-headed mindset she obtained. She graduated in May of 2018, and moved in with her boyfriend. That meant no more weekends, no more sleepovers, and no more stability in

my relationship with her. She kept me on the right path. She always made sure I was doing the right thing. It was the same with my brother and other sister. Watching her almost have to parent my brother was hard on me, and I can't even imagine the toll it took on her. She took on way more responsibility than any person in her position should. She is a caretaker and her courage shines brightly like a star to everyone she crosses paths with. I aspire to be like her. She now struggles with anxiety heavily. I wish that my other two siblings could have been better for her, and I can't even put into words how much I wish I was too. Her leaving was the second time I cried my eyes dry, but I had to have courage just like her and keep my head high.

After that, for five years, it was just me and my other sister. We never lived by the term "built-in-best friend." She and I fought like no other 90% of the time. She had issues regarding mental health and anxiety as well. There were countless times I watched her struggle and try to hold on to life. She attempted suicide multiple times right in front of my families' eyes, but we were too blind to see. Her junior year she was in an unhealthy relationship that ended up getting her into trouble. It was like *Deja Vu*: she mirrored my brothers' actions and went down the wrong road. For six months she was going out her window and to places such as parties, not getting home until anywhere from 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. This wasn't just a weekend thing either; it was every day. I started staying up, making sure she made it home alright. She still doesn't know it, but the nights she was out, I was up wondering if she was okay and not on a floor somewhere cold and dead. No matter how much we fought she was always my main priority. One night she showed up at 5 a.m. back to the house. We had a soccer game that day and had to load the bus at 6 a.m. She got no sleep and was still intoxicated. She eventually got caught by the athletic director who ended up contacting my mom and dad. After a long argument that I had to attend with her and my parents, she ended up leaving the house and living with a friend of hers for a while. I didn't talk to her for a whole week, not a single word. When she returned home, she wasn't herself. But how could someone be when something like that happens. Not shortly after she returned home, she spent another week away at our grandmother's house. She came back once again, but this time I was angry. I was angry about the pain I felt, angry she left me, and angry she didn't think of me when she was making these decisions. At some point her and my parents fought about the situation again, but this time badly. She burst

into my room crying, telling me she self-harmed. She begged me not to tell my parents. But I had already lost her for too long. I didn't want to lose her for good. I told my parents and that night she slept in my bed with me. The next day she got taken to a mental hospital to recover. She was gone for about a week, and when she returned, that 90% of fighting turned into a 70%. This change was minor but a massive deal to me. I didn't want to leave her side. I didn't want her to feel alone. She started only having two emotions due to the antidepressants she got put on: being happy or sad. I didn't know how to work my way around that. She refused to be medicated after a while because of her struggle not to be zombie-like. She graduated in May of 2023. She didn't wait long to move out. I started to see her only when she needed to come home and grab something. Her leaving was the third time I cried my eyes dry. The courage she had to have throughout her struggles was everything. She inspired my courage, lighting the final spark that my other siblings contributed to.

I'm now the only kid left in the house, and it gets lonely. I can no longer walk across the halls to make more memories. There are no more sleepovers with my sisters. No more video games or jokes with my brother. No more late-night talks with my siblings at all. I now have to find my own way and light my own path. I can't have the guidance I need from my siblings just by taking a couple footsteps and having a face-to-face conversation. I learned from my brother to stay in a good lane at a good pace. I learned from my oldest sister how much of an impact just caring has on an individual. I learned from my other sister that it's okay to make mistakes as long as you make good from wrong and be brave for yourself. I still talk to my brother, but it's rare. I only really see him on holidays. My oldest sister and I still have sleepovers sometimes at her house and text every day. And my other sister and I now say, "I love you," when we hang up the phone, and she comes over every other Sunday for dinner. People grow up; there's nothing to stop that. Growing up doesn't always mean growing apart. I now have strength, some knowledge, and courage of my own. If it weren't for those things my siblings helped build, I wouldn't be who I am today.



Roses in the Wind Rosalie Willson

Hot Springs County High School

Trigger Warning: Suicide

Have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror and seen someone else? I have, I changed myself so much to even look like my brother, dying my hair purple to match his. Throughout my life, I have always had a powerful relationship with my brother, Jean-Luc. I admire him so much for the person that he is. When I was younger I wanted to be just like him, but as I got older I struggled to find my identity as a person. With my brother leaving for college, I was losing an important support system in my life and a best friend. On top of that, I was losing myself and my identity. I knew exactly who my brother was, but I had no idea who I was. One person in particular helped me find myself as an individual. Her name was Stephanie, but we called her Steph, she had an older sister and struggled with the same identity crisis I did. She told me that “the world deserves individuals not copies of the same people”. It seems like being an individual is a simple task for a person to accomplish, yet it is not so simple for me it was the hardest thing I’ve ever been through. I had spent my whole life as someone else and then woke up one day to find that I had no idea who I was.

The first day of kindergarten is always scary, all the little kids gathered around on the bright, rainbow rug. A little boy the age of 5 with blonde curly hair and a smile that shines like gold is sitting there alone when another kid comes up to him. Jean-Luc and Stephanie met in kindergarten and have

been best friends ever since. I was three years old when I first met Stephanie. I don’t remember much from being that young but Stephanie was three years older than me. Even though my brother and I were so close, she became just as close to me very quickly. We were one family, unified. I can’t remember a time when she wasn’t a part of my life. A time before she came to my house for sleepovers or my brother’s birthday when we would play outside, chasing around the lawnmower my brother was learning how to drive on. Glistening memories of playing Super Smash Brothers on our Wii in the living room while it was snowing outside. Or huddling around a Nintendo DS, completely captivated by Fossil Fighters Champions until my mother would walk in scolding us for being awake still. Colorful memories of cards laying out on her dusty old carpet, while I watched longing to understand Magic The Gathering so that one day I could play with them. I was so young when I met her that the boundaries between friendship and family were skewed. I am aware that it is not common for a little sister to be so close to her siblings’ friends, but that was never an issue for us. When I met her, she accepted me as a friend and a sister, not just Jean-Luc’s annoying baby sister who wouldn’t leave them alone. While unconventional, it was all I had ever known growing up.

My freshman year of high school was the year that everything changed for me. Jean-Luc and Stephanie were seniors in high school and I was struggling with the fact that they were leaving. I have never been adverse to change. Usually, I just let it roll off me like water on a duck’s back, however, this change felt more like drowning. I suddenly realized that the one constant in my life was leaving and I did not know anyone except for them. Because they were my family I had struggled to make friends my age and I was so lonely when they weren’t around, I realized that this pit of loneliness would become oh so deeper. To wake up one day and realize that the person you are is not yourself is quite harrowing. When you love somebody so much it is hard to not want to be like them, to not want to simply be them. Every decision I made was based around him, in every activity we participated in, he was the captain, leader, and president, and every friend I had was his friend first. It felt like all of my choices were not my own and the natural response was to rebel and become opposite to the identity I had embodied for so long. However, that would not have worked out well for me because Jean-Luc is a straight-A student and scored a 32 on the ACT, moreover, he is a kind and loving person. To be the opposite of that was not an option for me. I didn’t want to become a terrible person just to be different from him. I didn’t want to disappoint my parents by becoming a horrendous person just to be different.

It was Stephanie who showed me that my actions do not have to be dictated by my brother’s actions. She pointed out that I don’t have to do activities simply because he is in

them, or even avoid activities because he is in them. One day during speech and debate we were sitting in the corner of the classroom when she told me about her own experience. She had not done speech and debate simply because her older sister was in it and she didn’t want to be compared to her, but when her older sister graduated and she started doing debate she regretted not doing it before. She told me; “I can enjoy the same things as Jean-Luc and continue doing them because I want to not because he is doing them”. I had finally woken up to see that I already had an Identity that only she could see. I was a person and it was okay to like the same things as Jean-Luc for my enjoyment. I did things for my enjoyment, not his. It is only natural for best friends to have similar interests, and that doesn’t make me fake or the same as Jean-Luc, it just means that we would have been best friends even if he weren’t my brother. She showed me the importance of having individual hobbies that are solely mine, not my brother’s. She helped me realize that there are things that I can do that no one else can do, like art. She said that she enjoyed coding and that was something her sister did not enjoy. I finally understood that I have individual traits that are just as amazing as Jean-Luc’s but completely mine.

It was early in the spring morning delicate dew drops sitting on the sill plants covered with a thick crisp air. The sun was yet to rise, and all of a sudden a single gunshot fired through the silent morning, shattering the crisp morning air, shaking the trees, and waking the birds. Stephanie took her own life on April 23rd, 2023, I remember this moment as if it were yesterday, I remember walking into school on a Monday morning, and one of my favorite teachers pulled me aside to tell me what had happened. He said, “Stephanie had taken her own life this morning and I wanted you to hear it from me.” I remember feeling like I was underwater, no sounds could reach me, like I was out in space, consumed by silence. I went to class and sat in a sea of numbness not processing what was happening. Uncontrolled tears cascaded down my cheeks without me noticing at all. Finally, I realized that I was too overwhelmed to be in class. My feet started taking me down the stairs, one foot after the other, again and again. The only thought in my head was; “ I have to get out of here”, soon enough I found myself in the library. My fingers moved to my mom’s contact and hit the button on the screen. I could barely speak and when I finally said “Stephanie committed suicide”, it felt like I had broken through the sound barrier. I finally realized what had happened when I said it aloud. When I finally landed back on earth my first thought was for my brother, he would be devastated by the news. Did he even know what happened? I fumbled for my phone and with trembling fingers hit his contact. He didn’t pick up. I knew that he would be crippled by the loss, I was horrified by the thought that he would also be taken away from me. When I finally heard his voice through fuzzy phone

audio, I was back home in my bed curled in blanks, my head resting on a damp pillow. It was like a cold rain had started to pour after a drought, it was wet and cold but at least it was being soaked into the dry ground. I was ripped apart by what I had heard, that Steph was so unhappy that she would do such a thing. When someone takes their own life it is different from any other death. She chose to end everything and that is too harrowing for a healthy person to understand. You can’t allow yourself to empathize because they are in such a dark place. During the remaining days of school, I felt more alone than I ever had. The one person who understood what my life felt like was gone. The one person I confided in, who was advising and supporting me, was gone, without her, I plunged into the darkest pit of sorrow, not only was I back where I started but I was lower.

However, a beautiful thing happened during this time in my life as I began to heal. At the time we were reading “The Alchemist” in English class. The book ends with Santiago feeling the Lavanter, a wind that blows from Africa to Spain. The Levanter winds are sent to him, and he receives a kiss, a message that his love sent to him through the wind. At Steph’s funeral, her mom mentioned that Steph was finally able to travel the world like she always wanted. This reminded me of the wind. It is hopeful to think that whenever the wind blows that is her reassuring me. When we spread her ashes they were fused into rose petals, I got to watch her flutter away in the gentle breeze to discover the world like she had always wanted. Suddenly, I was Santiago, standing and watching something beautiful, something free.

To spend your whole life trying to be someone else is one thing. But, losing the person who showed you that you can be your person, is another. To finally feel understood by someone who values the person you are before you’ve even found yourself is something truly special. Then, to have that person who changed your life be taken away from you is more life-changing than I can express with words. She changed me in so many ways, and now that I have found my identity thanks to her I will never let it go so easily. I now pride myself on never compromising my identity through the toughest times of my life. If not to benefit myself then to honor all that Stephanie did for me. I am finally a person that I am proud of. It is often said that you are raised by the people around you, Stephanie raised me to the person I am today and I am eternally grateful to her. She is the reason I am not a carbon copy of my brother. She is the reason I finally found myself. She used to tell me; “the world already has a Jean-Luc, it needs Rosalie too”.



My Day In A Nutshell

Nevaeh Young
Rock River School

Six months ago, I was scared to explain my bipolar disorder because I was worried about what people would think or say. A year ago, I did not want to accept it. I have a condition nobody wants to discuss because they don't understand. Today, I have gained enough courage to talk about my day in a nutshell. A day that consists of extreme highs and extreme lows. A day of up-and-down mood swings and manic episodes. A day of intense energy, followed by sadness and a feeling of hopelessness. A day of multiple looks, judgments, and comments said behind my back. A day with struggles to advocate what I need because nobody knows what I'm going through. This is just the start of my days locked inside and then breaking free from a crazy nutshell.

As someone who lives and experiences bipolar everyday, but has also watched glass shatter, as my brother falls to the ground with tears, it is pretty devastating. Moments and decisions my mother made left my family heartbroken. For the nine months my mother carried me, she had a decision to make and that was choosing between righteous and dishonorable. She chose dishonorable as her path. My mother ended up taking a lot of drugs including: cocaine, heroin, and ecstasy, all of which affected me and my health. Five out of those nine months, she was in prison because she decided to sell drugs for money instead of getting a job. When I was born, my mother was still in prison so when the time came, a guard transported her to a hospital. My first look at life was a prison program where my mom could straighten up and still be a part

of the community while raising me. I felt failed from the start. Even my mother being gifted a beautiful newborn baby was not enough to turn her life around. Not only did my mother neglect me but she abandoned me. She blamed my grandma for being put in prison instead of taking responsibility for her own actions.

I ended up being raised by my aunt, who at times, also made unwise decisions. In that household, I was abused, I was left home alone and I was hungry. I ate fruity pebbles in a bowl that I poured myself and then got water from the sink and sat down. It sounds disgusting when you think about it, but it's all I had. The adults in my life were on an unpleasant path. I know they still cared just in an unhealthy way and the ones who could show me the right way were out of the equation because my mom said so.

Growing up, I remember my older sister who lived with our grandmother riding her bike seven miles to bring me food. Once she arrived she called and told grandma that as she walked through the door the house was a mess. By this time I was old enough to remember and it stuck with me. My sister also explained that the cupboards were empty and the dishes were piled. Laundry was spread throughout the house. It was a struggle to walk from the living room to the bedroom, to the front door and even through the back hallway.

By the time I started kindergarten, I began experiencing manic episodes. I was frustrated and I didn't know how to stop. I was fidgeting with my fingers then I would find something to go off about, I'd start screaming and pick up pencils and throw them without knowing why. Feeling like I had nobody to depend on, I would react poorly and make terrible actions. Listening to my family tell me what I was like in kindergarten makes me flustered because looking back now I wish five year old me knew what life had to offer.

At the age of seven, my aunt drove me to my grandmother, opened the door, threw me out and left nothing but dust in the air. She said I was so out of control and she couldn't handle me. Again, I felt abandoned and thrown away by yet another person. I had no idea what was going on. I was lost. Why was I acting like this? Why couldn't I just be like everyone else? The concept of everyone being normal and me being different made me feel alone, like nobody understood me. After only a few months with my grandmother, I was thrown into a new world when my grandma took me to the children's hospital, where I was diagnosed with bipolar. At the time, I was too young to understand what it meant to have bipolar disorder. From a young age, I always felt like a burden, like nobody wanted me around or even cared whether I was alive. My mind was always racing, I never could control it. It was in control of me.

Living with these experiences has helped me develop more of who I am. It has helped me understand that my mind and my tantrums aren't because of other people. I have grown

to learn that I must take responsibility for my actions. Having bipolar makes me feel alone and different, like I have nobody I can talk to. It makes it harder to function throughout the day and difficult to move on from challenges. It consists of extreme highs like being happy and unable to quit talking because I feel so excited about an upcoming event. I've felt all of these things, and it feels pretty incredible. I wish I felt that way all the time. Then there are the opposite days that I feel victimized, hurt, and alone. These feelings bring out all sorts of reactions. Sometimes I just cry and other times, I get so furious I'll start to throw things or scream at anyone around me. By the time it's over, I don't even remember how it all started. I have grown to learn that others don't deserve that. When it's over I know that I must apologize and do my best to fix those broken pieces.

I saw therapist after therapist, took numerous prescribed medications, and was hospitalized. It wasn't until this past year after a third and final hospitalization that I was prescribed the right medications which I learned are essential for me to take and began working non stop to be the best me I could be. I found a therapist who helped me better understand who I am and how I can control my reactions.

I may not always like taking medications, but it helps me function throughout the day and keep my mood swings under control. When I wasn't taking my medications, I found myself acting as the worst version of myself and ended up in the hospital at the behavioral health unit.

The first time I lay alone in the hospital with tears rolling down my face, it was the most alone I've ever felt. I hated being there and couldn't believe my grandparents would send me to such a place. Not once, but three times. The third time at the age of 15 was when I finally took responsibility and stopped blaming others for my actions. I finally wanted to work on myself. By the time I was discharged from my third hospitalization in Colorado, I was no longer going to let bipolar control me. I realized there is always a way to be who I want to be; I just have to work for it.

A few months after being released from the hospital, my psychiatric provider recommended I try a new therapist. I wasn't thrilled because I'd seen so many growing up, and none had worked. But I thought to myself that I needed someone to talk to and gain more skills and knowledge, so I decided to give it a try. As I walked up to the office of my next therapist for the first time I was nervous that she'd be like every other one and it would be the same as every other time. But it turned out, she was different, or maybe I was different. I finally found someone I was willing to work with and give my full attention to. After a few months of working with her, I finally saw how I could make my life move forward.

I'm seventeen now and wow has time flown by. I've

learned so much about myself and skills to function. The present is what I've been reaching for my whole life. I see the most relaxed version of myself. I smell lavender. It smooths my skin and my hands are soft as they gently rub against each other. When I'm frustrated my favorite skill is the sound of my music. When I reach and kindly grab my earbuds and put them in my ear. The sound of piano relaxes me, my body begins swaying back and forth and my fingers go from tight to loose. In those moments I smell my lavender lotion on my hands and my mind gently rewinds back to its normal self and I move forward with my day. This is me now and I'm so proud of myself.

Living with courage is waking up every morning and taking my medication so that I can live without the stress of having a manic episode. Courage is owning my mental health and taking responsibility to help others understand so I can repair relationships and move forward. It's living my life in control. It's going to college to earn the privilege to become a pharmacist that can help others who are going through similar journeys. It's accepting myself for who I am. It's working on my overthinking and my negative thoughts. It's learning how to break out of the nutshell and let loose. It's being happy while also knowing I can be sad and fed up but that it is still okay. It's the ability to live life with bipolar disorder. It's a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. It's a young girl who blossomed against the odds. It's the ability to understand that bipolar comes with different battles, and when they arrive, controlling it and brushing it off my shoulders like nothing ever happened. Courage is acknowledging my past but embracing it and using it to fuel my future. These are my days locked inside and then breaking free from a crazy nutshell.



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