



# UNTOLD STORIES UTAH 2022

An Anthology of Narratives and Artwork by Utah Youth in Care



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**“There is no greater agony than bearing  
an untold story inside you.”**

*MAYA ANGELOU*

*An Anthology of Narratives and Artwork by Utah Youth in Care*

*Dedicated to the Power of Story to Create Meaning in Our World*

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Untold Stories Utah 2022

# About Untold Stories Utah 2022

What fun I have had the past nine years writing with Utah's Youth in Care. What could be more fun than assisting students on society's margins tell the world about their lives? The hundreds of young people who have written their untold stories for this project have had so much to say, so much to teach us.

Often, they choose to share difficult stories of loss and pain, drugs and gangs, addiction and incarceration, difference and identity, trauma and healing. But they have also shared wild adventures of danger and close calls, of joyriding and running from the cops, of crashing cars and being cuffed, of lockups and crazy fights, and many of these reckless adventures were told with few regrets. I enjoyed all these stories, and I would always prefer to hear an honest adventure than a phony apology.

Rarely but memorably, a young teller would share with me how the writing and retelling of traumatic life events helped restructure the meaning of those events, bringing past experiences into clearer focus. Stories have that power, the power to reframe wounding memories and the power to heal.

I have loved stories since I was a child turning the pages of Golden Books before I was old enough to read. Read me a story, tell me a story, let's make up a story, watch TV, go to the movies – stories in every form are the bread of life. As the late writer Joan Didion declared: "We tell ourselves stories to live." And I agree with her forever. Please, if you have the opportunity to serve young people who are confused, in crisis, in trouble, in pain, remember the power of story. Just kindly whisper: Tell me your story.

And, know that the focused writing of a short personal narrative has immense value, especially for young people in crisis, living on society's margins, carrying the burden of trauma. Over the years I developed a technique of co-writing stories with students, a powerful method of assisting young writers frame and reframe their experiences. No matter the procedure, remember the power of stories and storytelling to open the heart of the teller and listener and to create understanding, hope and healing.

The numbers. Over the past nine years I have read approximately 1,300 five-hundred-word personal narratives written by students in Utah's Youth in Care school programs. We have published eight Untold Stories Utah anthologies honoring 299 winner and finalist stories, selected by skilled volunteer readers from the community. Thank you to our story readers and their hours of service to this project. Plus, every anthology has featured the wonderful artwork of youth in YIC programs. Stories can be told with stunning beauty in many forms and media.

Many of these stories follow common themes and stories lines, but just when I think I have heard it all, I have found myself stunned by stories I could not have imagined I would encounter. I would never have predicted the story awarded First Place in this year's contest, "My True Self," a remarkable telling of a young woman's struggle with autism and ADHD. I assisted this young writer in the writing and editing of her story on Zoom on a day when she could not speak. How did that work? She and I went on a brave adventure. We could both see her draft on Zoom screenshare. She could hear me speak, and I could correct the document under her direction. She communicated with me on Zoom chat. This was a whole new experience for both of us. Read her prize-winning narrative and see that our efforts were successful.

In this anthology the top-placing narratives include stories of alienation and imaginary friends, a young bisexual woman struggling for peace in a religious community and with God, the trauma of a young woman's realization that she had been cruelly exploited by her boyfriend, and the regret



and heartbreak of a young man's discovery of his twin sister's suicide. All amazing stories worthy of reading, respect, and remembrance.

As I reread all the stories in this anthology, searching for typos and errors, I made a discovery: I love these stories. I love the bravery of the students in telling these difficult tales. I continue to be stunned by the courage of students who shared stories of family or friend's suicides or their own suicide attempts; of being raped; of drive-by shootings and the deaths of homies; of brutal assaults and betrayals; of being abandoned by fathers and mothers; of bullying and being a bully; of experiencing the hatred of racism and rejection; of acknowledging the pain and possible redemption of lockup. I would like to read these stories to all the world. To broadcast these students reading their own stories 24-7 forever. The world needs to know.

I leave this project with enormous pride in the work the students, teachers, artists, administrators, facility staff, story readers, formatters, printers, and editors have invested in creating these lovely anthologies. Without the power to publish in a professional format, this project would have lost much of its energy and force. Thank you to USBE for providing the funding to print these lovely little books.

Never forget the words of the Hopi proverb: "The one who tells the stories rules the world." Engrave those words upon your heart and mind. Stories are power. The story is the first and most basic way of making meaning. Honor your stories. Honor the stories of youth. Even listen to their war stories, and then ask if that is the true story of their hearts, the story they want to leave for the world, for their children. Listen to all their stories, for in those stories you will know their hearts. And they will come to know their own hearts as they tell and retell their tales.

*Bonnie Shaw, PhD, Utah YIC Creative Arts Coordinator*

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

Thanks to the teachers who supported their students in writing stories to submit to this year's contest: Mark Marsing at Gemstone and DSI, Salt Lake Valley Youth Center; Emily Juett at Detention, Salt Lake Valley Youth Center; Tori Allen at Mill Creek Youth Center; Anders Kvaal at Odyssey Adolescent; Lindsay Eberhardt at Canyons Youth Academy; Dieter Holstein at Decker Lake Youth Center; Lorraine Simmons at Slate Canyon Youth Center; Andrea Carter at Farmington Bay Youth Center; and Deina Mitton at Manti Youth Academy. And thanks to the following art teachers for submitting student artwork: Emily Holmes at Mill Creek Youth Center; Cathleen Taggart at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center; and Anders Kvaal at Odyssey Adolescent. Thanks to the following administrators for supporting this project: Jason Rosvall, Granite School District; Marv Luddington, Davis School District; and Kyle Goudie, Julia Armstrong, Amanda Charlesworth and Heidi Pitkin, USBE. Thanks to Juliann Law, graphic artist and Utah Correctional Industries, printers.

## **ON THE COVER:**

The artwork on the cover, which I have named "City Moon," was created by a talented young man at Mill Creek Youth Center. Emily Holmes is the amazingly creative and skilled art teacher who has been guiding the efforts of this young artist. This glowing full moon, filling the darkness with light, with wonder, could be rising or receding. Such a moon symbolizes, if we wish, both the end of this story writing project and the luminous enduring energy of the hundreds of stories students have written for this project during the last eight years — an energy sent out into the world each time a story is read. A story is a circle, the beginning spinning around to an ending, wisely echoing its opening words, questions finding answers, problems seeking solutions, word after word creating a road winding out of confusion and much darkness into, if we dare to see it, a little light. "City Moon" bless these tales of trauma and truth all through the incantation of the telling and retelling of their simple yet haunting dispatches to the brave explorer who desires to enter here.

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*Created at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center*



# My True Self

*written by S. W. at Canyons Youth Academy*

When I was fourteen, I got diagnosed with ADHD and autism. It wasn't a big deal because I was homeschooled, and lots of my friends had the same things. I didn't really struggle with anything and could get help whenever I needed it.

Then I went to live with my dad in May of 2021. He doesn't like that I'm a bit different and so he's never supported me. As time went on, I started having meltdowns, which are unfortunately very common with autism. My meltdowns were from stress, so much change in my life and no one to talk to about it. After a couple months of intense therapy and a short stay at inpatient, I didn't have the meltdowns as bad or as often, but I instead bottled it all up. I also started taking medication that lowered my response to stress.

Then I started going to school full-time for the first time because it was court ordered. I haven't been able to "unmask" or show my autistic traits, like rocking, pacing, or humming, at school. Being able to display my autistic traits helps me regulate my mood and keeps me calm.

Managing the social stuff at school has taken a toll on my mental and physical health. I am a bit depressed, and my body has no energy. I also have long spells where I can't speak. Sometimes I can communicate via sign language or writing/typing. Other times it's like there's a switch in my brain that gets flipped and I don't understand language. Usually when that happens, I can still communicate with animals like dogs. I can always understand what others are saying, and it's frustrating because they don't get that it's not my choice to not speak — it just happens. They think I'm being rude or ignoring them; in reality, I do want to engage. I just can't do it in a neurotypical way. Right now, I'm trying to figure out options to speak when I can't, like an Augmentative / Alternative Communication app.

But autism and ADHD aren't all bad; there's really awesome parts too. I see the world differently, and that's a really cool thing. I also love having hyper-fixations because then I can focus for hours, days, weeks, months, or years on something I'm interested in and gain a lot of knowledge about it. I'm interested in making psychedelic trance music and the science behind it. I also love psychology, autism, ADHD, reading, politics, and figure skating.

Every autistic person is unique. We all have our own strengths and weaknesses. I wish people would see autism as a way of being instead of some incurable disease. I don't need a cure; I just need support, understanding and patience from the people around me. If other people understood autism, it would make it easier to feel like I could show my true self and thrive. But I will show my true self no matter what.



# Intimate Strangers

written by W. at Canyons Youth Academy

My life is clouded by strangers I know.

I moved around a lot. First because of my dad's job, then because of my parents' disheveled divorce. I've been all over. When I moved, I moved far; at least across the country, if not out of it. The only time I went two years at the same school was 5th and 6th grades.

I was a bully. I was apathetic and never thought about effects. In 2nd grade, I was suspended for stealing an email and sending hate. In 3rd, I was expelled for stealing matches and starting fires. I was suspended repeatedly from other schools for fighting. I always moved and never saw those students again.

I ran away repeatedly. Once, when I was nine, I ended up counties away from home. I finally stopped to ask for water. The lady called the police, and I never saw her again.

I would go to creeks with my friend and burn stuff. I liked going for sleepovers because Mike's house felt strange. His mom was very nice; she scared me but always listened. We found crushed pills in his bathroom once. I moved to a boarding school and never saw him again.

Boarding school was liminal; I don't remember most of it. Some kids I knew overdosed. I hurt myself a lot there. I would beat my head against walls until I couldn't feel or think anymore. I was mocked relentlessly for it. I graduated and never saw any of them again.

I had an imaginary friend. She was a poet and aspirant. She told me to hurt myself. She was mad; she wanted me to be better. I used to try and go by her name. Slowly, she faded until I never saw her again.

I was sent to the hospital for suicidality. They gave me meds that I wasn't supposed to have and put me in a room where I couldn't hurt myself. I screamed for help until my throat bled. I was glad I'd never see anyone there again.

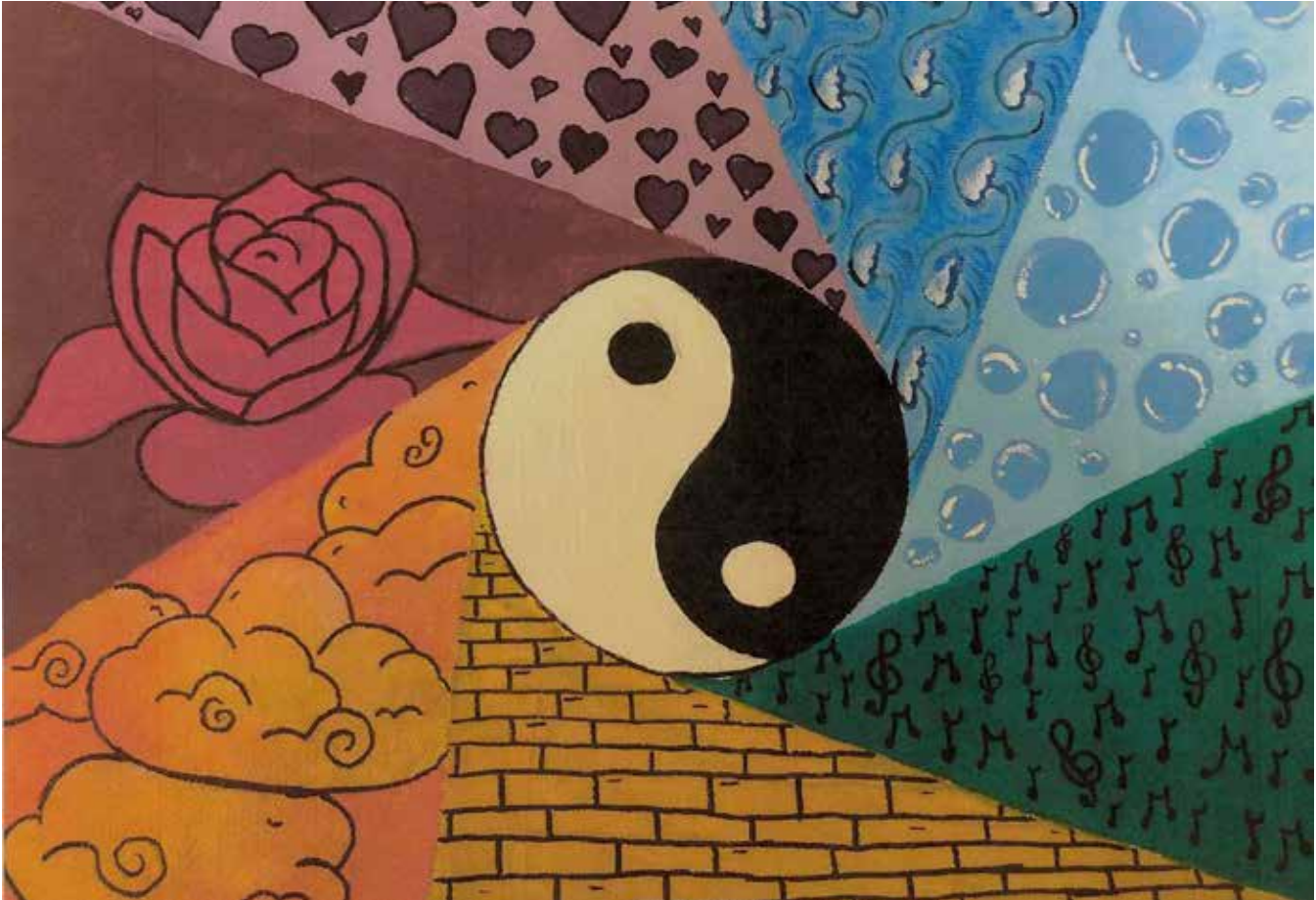
Then, I went to day treatment. I learned a lot of words. Dissociation, depersonalization, derealization — these are things that are not normal. Trauma isn't normal. These aren't feelings that just happen to people sometimes. I was finally told, candidly, there was something *wrong* with me. At the time, I hated hearing it. Now, I'm glad to have an answer.

My solution to everything can't be to not exist. I can't just make myself a placeholder to wait until I leave again.

Someday, I will know this person. The face I duck out of my reflection to avoid. The one that stares at hands that aren't mine. The "who" that answers to names they can't tell if they like or not. The paradox that rolls between "yes" or "no." What fumbles "I" and "us" and "you" internally.

One day, I will look at these strangers in the mirror, in photographs, and never see them again.





*Created at Farmington Bay Youth Center*

# Collateral Damage

written by N. P. at Gemstone/SLVYC

Running as fast as I could. Cops. *Crap*, I thought as I was leaving my house on January 11, 2020.

My mom had kicked me out. Her new family was more important, yet she still outed me to the cops for running away. I was hiding at my friend's house, but I was heartbroken and pissed off. Later that day, my boyfriend had one of his friends pick us up. I thought this was a very bad idea, but in the back of my head there was a voice telling me, *No one wants me. I am worthless to my family.* I went.

We got to a very rundown house, the messiest house I have ever seen. A couple weeks passed. I had been caught and ran again twice. I realized that I wanted to get out of town. I needed to, or I was going to get picked up and brought to my mom's, the person who couldn't stand me. So, I left. I got out of town. I told my boyfriend that I thought it was the safest option, and he agreed.

We stole a car, picked a state, and drove. We drove and drove.

Then I heard, "We're out of gas."

I wondered, "*What are we freakin' doing? How are we going to get gas?*"

My boyfriend left me in the car for a while and then came back with money. I asked, "How did you do that?"

He didn't tell me, so I continued to wonder. Why couldn't I know what he was doing? Well, he was selling drugs. I figured that out because my dad used to get money. I pieced it together.

We continued to drive. We were in Las Vegas now. We stopped to say hi to some people my boyfriend knew, and when I walked into that house, I saw more drugs than I had ever seen before in my whole life. It was shocking. I have seen lots of drugs before but never this much. My boyfriend told me to go out to the car, open the back door, and be ready to drive.

Gunshots! He came running out of the house and got into the car. I drove. Gunshots were still blasting behind me. Bang! I got dizzy and felt a sharp pain in my shoulder. I was bleeding. I'd been shot. My boyfriend told me, "Keep driving."

After we were in the clear, he told me, "You're not going to die. You'll be fine."

I saw, for the first time, I was like a pawn in a game – collateral damage – not a person.

I survived even though he left me on the side of the road. I gave up everything, a home and family, even my friends, who really cared for this "lifestyle." It is taking time to get completely away from it, but I am slowly moving my life in a different direction. I *am* a person and will never again be collateral damage.





# How God Made Me

written by K. E. at Canyons Youth Academy

When I was eleven, I was talking with my grandma. This day, she told me about the line from Leviticus saying, "Man shall not lie in bed with man." She informed me that everyone has a choice; some choose to be gay. Little did she know, that at the age of seven, I had already realized that I was bisexual.

She informed me that everything having to do with LGBTQ+ people was bad. She told me to suppress my "gayness," settle for a man and have his children. Then when I die, I'll go to heaven, meet my soulmate, who would also be a man, and I would be fixed.

But I had hope that my church believed in more than homophobia. So, when at thirteen I went to church girls camp, I thought it'd be a great opportunity to get to know the girls, learn what they truly believed in and create a safe space for people like me.

When we got to the cabin, I ran around with my bisexual flag wrapped around my shoulders. I felt pride, excitement, and safety until one day when the girls all got together and were talking about LGBTQ+ folks. When I walked in and heard the topic, I was excited to educate them and tell them about LGBTQ+ history. *My* history. But I was met with the old lies: "You can choose to be gay but being trans is disgusting, inhumane and wrong." The girls cheered at the statement and clapped, acting as if what was being said was something to be celebrated.

This shocked me. I knew these girls. I grew up with them. We'd been through a lot together. I never thought there would be such a gross, ugly side to them. And what they said really, truly hurt me down to my deepest core.

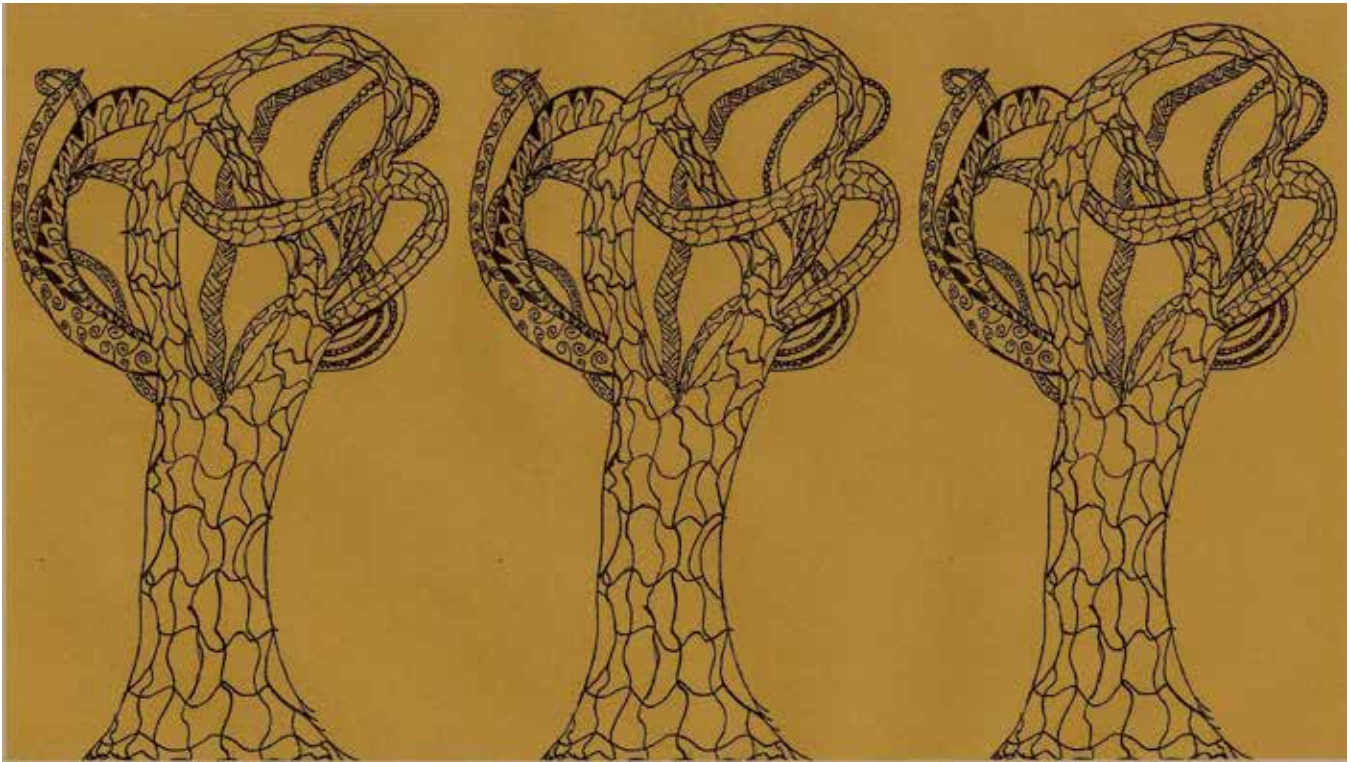
I ran outside, dropped to the ground, and cried, even yelling at God, and asking, "Why did you make me this way? What did I do to deserve this? What did I do wrong?"

I felt awful as if I was what was wrong with this world. I felt like I didn't deserve the life that I had because I wasn't perfect in these girls' eyes. Soon, though, I went back inside and sat on my bed. One of the girls came in and asked me, "Why are you crying?" I explained to her what happened.

She apologized and gave me the best advice she could offer, telling me, "If gay and trans people weren't meant to exist, then they wouldn't. The only thing they can really do is be the best people they can be."

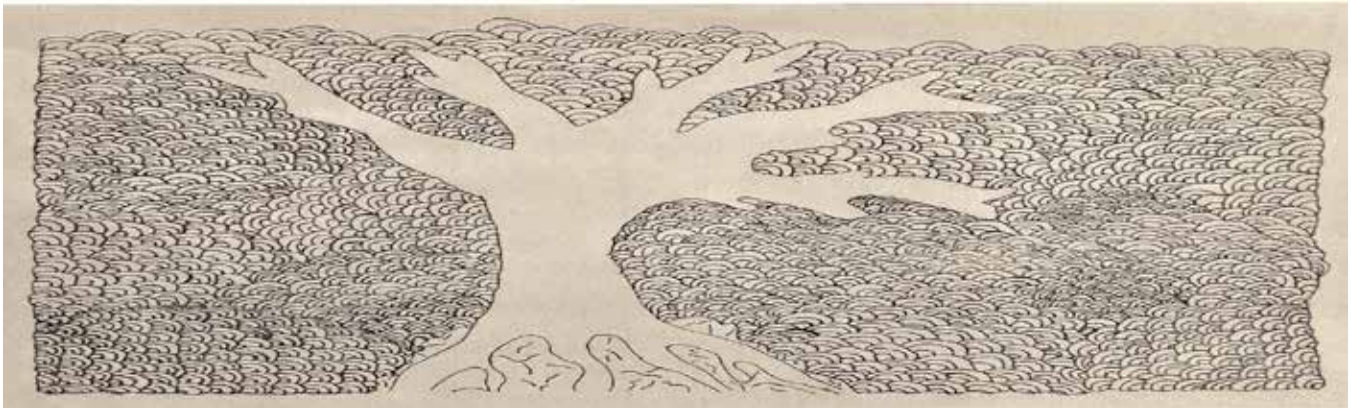
Now at seventeen I am no longer angry about what those girls at church camp said, and I realize that they were just uneducated. I know that my God, who is ten times more loving, caring, and forgiving than I am, will forgive them. Even though what they said was hurtful, I am not hurt by those ideas anymore. I have pride. And I am proud to be who God created me to be.





If you don't know the trees—you may be lost in the forest. If you don't know the stories—you may be lost in everything.

*Siberian Elder*



*Created at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center*

# If Only I Had Opened the Door

written by D. E. at Detention/SLVYC

The day started normal. I woke up and got on my laptop to make a song. My sister came into my room to tell me about her night. She knew I always liked to hear about it. We talked for a while, and as I was making my song, she asked to hear it. She listened to it, and she said, "I like it."

She usually didn't like my songs, so I was really happy that she liked it. The day went on, and I spoke to her here and there throughout the day. My sister left the house to go to a friend's house, nothing out of the ordinary. I decided to listen to some music super loud since I was the only one home.

An hour later she came back banging on my door, but I ignored what she was saying because the music was loud, and I was into it. I wish I had heard her, but I didn't open the door to ask, "What is wrong?" I just ignored her. I would never do that. I don't know why I did it that time.

About thirty minutes later, I turned off my music, and the house went quiet. I realized I hadn't heard from her for a while, so I got up to go look for her and ask if she was okay. I couldn't find her. I texted my mom, asking: "Where is Sav?" Mom texted me: "Look everywhere in the house." So, I did look everywhere for about fifteen minutes. Except for one place. The one place where she was. The garage.

Finally, I looked in the garage, and I saw Sav hanging from the garage door track. She had committed suicide. Whatever happened at her friend's house made her so upset that she had killed herself. She was only sixteen. I untied the rope and took her down.

Shortly after I found Sav, my parents came home to find me crying and just holding her. I told my parents, "She was already gone when I found her."

If only I had opened the door when she banged on it, maybe she could be alive today. I wish I never had ignored her. I regret it every day. I live with the thought that I could've saved my twin sister's life — *If only if I had opened the door.*

Now I am seventeen, and ten months have passed since that day. Every single day my mind goes back to that Sunday afternoon. I wish I could've done more. If only I had opened that g\*\*\*\*\* door. The song I was making that Sunday, I have decided to make it about my twin sister and dedicate it to her. After all it was the one that she liked, so I have called it: "The One She Liked." I listen to it every day.



# Mom and Me, Our Odyssey

*written by S. T. at Odyssey Adolescent*

I'd been taking care of my nine-year-old brother for a few months, when one day our mother finally got out of bed to go to the "store." I was so excited to see her awake and dressed that I asked, "Can I please come with?"

I didn't care that I was busy. I didn't care that I was about to head out the door. I didn't even care that I hated going to the store. All I cared about was spending time with her. All I cared about was being with my mom before she went back to bed, drowning in her pool of liquor and pills.

As she sunk into her depression, she told me, "No, I'll be right back," and shut the door before I could turn to argue.

By the time I went outside, she was already pulling out of the lot. I watched her drive away.

It was becoming dark when I started making dinner, just like I did all the other nights. My brother and I sat at the table wondering where mom had gone. I cracked a joke and faked a smile, hoping to keep that light in his eyes and protect his innocence from the darkness.

Time had passed, weeks gone by, and mom was still nowhere to be seen. I was twelve years old and used all my birthday money to help with bills that month including the rent. I remember how kind our landlord was. Though he always seemed sad as he waved goodbye.

Our dad picked us up and as we drove to his place; I realized we'd no longer be staying at mom's.

"Where is she?" I asked him after my brother went to bed.

"She's in the hospital," he replied gently.

"What happened?" I asked, trying hard to fight my tears.

I was told that my mother was found in a parking lot by a guy who was fortunately walking his dog. He called the cops at the sight of her passed out over her steering wheel. An attempted suicide, they reported. Any later and she would've died.

It took a long time for things to get better. My first experience living on the streets, getting locked up, and going to rehab was shared with my mother. At fourteen years old I then started using meth as my "helping hand." Nothing seemed to actually help until we hit rock bottom and found Odyssey House. She has been sober for 852 days while having only had one lapse. And I've been clean for 145 days.

Odyssey means a voyage usually marked by many changes of fortune. This is how I view my life so far. I've been on a long, rocky road with many ups and downs, but every adventure has taught me so much, and done nothing but help me grow. The path to recovery is an everyday choice. Each step is hard and beautiful and worth it. I promise.







*Created at Odyssey Adolescent*

# Blue

*written by S. K. at Gemstone/SLVYC*

“Brace yourself. You’ve had enough, and you’re at school. One more line,” I said to myself as I leaned my head forward and inhaled blue powder. Leaning back, I exhaled with a sigh of relief, “A-h-h-h.”

That’s how my morning started before whatever power or innocence I had left was taken from me. Before “they” took it away.

After school, I ended up at my best friend’s house where I would make the worst mistake of my life. My friend Kary picked me up. Alan sat in the passenger seat and Alec, my two-day fling from over a year ago, sat next to me. Alec reached over and grabbed my left breast as he told me, “You look like the porn star, Mia Khalifa.” This was an ongoing joke he had started, that all my so-called “friends” called me. I hit his hand and told him, “Stop!” Before we got to Catherine’s house, we picked up another guy, named Gary. Soon, Christopher, who’d been like an older brother to me, showed up.

When we got to Catherine’s, I needed juice for my vape. I knew Alan had some, but he said, “Send me a topless pic first.”

I did. I was fourteen. I had no clue what was really going on, what it really meant, what I was being asked to do. When I think back, I’m still stunned and confused. Anyway, I did it.

That’s when Alec came up behind me on the couch, choking me. I told him, “Stop!”

I hit him. He just laughed and continued. My face was turning blue. Kary finally stepped in and stopped him. Kary left minutes later, and the choking continued.

Suddenly, Alec and Gary grabbed me, both touching my body. I screamed. I yelled, “No! Stop!”

They laughed while Christopher and Alan just sat there on their phones. I got away and sat on the bed. Alec was on the floor across the room with Greg standing near him. Alex called me over, so I walked over. He grabbed my ankle, squeezing tightly. I tried kicking and fell.

I got up, but Gary grabbed me, walked me over to the bed and held me on his lap. Alex spread my legs apart. A lot happened that night. As my “friends” watched and laughed, ignoring my screams, Alec and Gary assaulted me.

Afterwards, I had thought I had lost everything. I started breaking into houses and stealing cars.

More lines of blue powder went through my body. I even tried to overdose on ninety pills. I died for two minutes, and my little brother took me to the hospital.

After a mental hospital, extensive therapy, cutting people from my life and getting clean, plus receiving support from my real friends and family, I have started to regain control, my power over my own body, self-love, and my innocence. It has taken over a year, and I still struggle every day.



# My Dad and Me

*written by R. T. at Canyons Youth Academy*

“Life sometimes deals you a bad hand. Like gambling at a Las Vegas casino, you don’t have a choice in the hands you’re dealt. No matter a good or lousy deck of cards, the game will be played to the end. There’s no point in complaining about a terrible situation; you just play with what you have been dealt.”

This quote has always meant something to me ever since the first time I read it. What this quote says to me is to work with what you’ve got to get what you want. My dad lives and breathes this quote. He was the one who first showed me this quote.

Growing up my dad was an addict and homeless. I remember staying at my mom’s, always wondering if dad was ever gonna come back. I could visit him every now and then. He got into a group home and stayed, working hard on staying clean and doing some extra work here and there to get his own place.

I remember the first night he got it. I was seven years old. It was an old, beat-up one-bedroom apartment that looked like it could use some renovation. But that didn’t matter to my nine-year-old sister and me; all we cared about was that we could finally stay with dad. I remember we didn’t even have a bed or anything for a good month, and we slept on the floor in sleeping bags.

Dad eventually got everything we needed. We had a bed, a couch and three foam mats for my bed on the floor. My dad would sleep on the couch when my sister and I would come over. My dad went from sleeping in a van and having nothing to now having his own place and being ten years clean.

Now I am sixteen years old, and my dad has been active in my life. Even though I live with my mom, I see my dad about three times each month. We work on cars and drive around and go to car shows. I have learned a lot of about how to take care of cars from my dad.

When I have been in trouble, my dad has been there to help me. If I need someone to talk to, my dad is always there. He checks in on me every day to make sure I have had a good day, and he gives me money so I can go have fun with my friends. My dad is a really good dad and is always working his hardest to provide.

My dad and I both believe in dealing with the hand we have been dealt. Both my dad and I do not complain about what we don’t have and are grateful for what we have. And most important, we have each other.







*Created at Mill Creek Youth Center*



# The Ankle Monitor

*written by C. P. at Canyons Youth Academy*

I am home. As usual. There are four walls, a kitchen, a bathroom, a living room and me. Always me. I am court-ordered to be at home. I can leave for school, to be with my immediate family, and that's it. It is boring. It is boring. It is boring. To top it off, I also am electronically monitored. I can shower with it on, but I have to remember to always keep it charged. I have to remember not to shower too long. I don't want to know what would happen if I did, and it went off.

When I first got the ankle monitor, it hurt. It is clunky. I had a hard time finding a comfortable way to sleep. I am used to it now. I might get it off soon. Will it feel like freedom? Will it feel like just a regular leg again?

The court decides so much about my life. When I first got involved with the court system, I didn't know what to expect. Now I just plug in the date on my calendar and hope I can stop plugging in my ankle monitor.

I wonder if my judge has ever been monitored like me. I wonder if the lawyers see me as more than a case. I wonder if I will have to join my friends that are locked up. If I mess up on my ankle monitor, I will probably find out about being locked up with my friends. Maybe if I join them, there will be less boredom and more freedom.

At this point, I don't even like being home. I am tired of it. It is the same thing every day. It is boring. It is boring. It is boring.

If I did not have this ankle monitor, I would not be at home. I would be out with my friends, and we would go to Tiffany Town, a street where we hang out. I like to be with my friends.

I won't tell you why I have the ankle monitor. Just know there are two sides to every story, and mine isn't boring. I am bored, but my story is not boring.



# Gunshots to My Heart

*written by M. H. at Odyssey Adolescent*

Three a.m. I've been inhaling meth, all day, all night. I'm sleepy but can't close my eyes. Suddenly, I hear sirens getting louder. I pick up my phone and call my dad multiple times without an answer. The cops have been chasing my dad all my life. Stressing, I go back to picking at my face. Thoughts are racing through my mind, "Why didn't he answer? Did he get caught?"

Alarmed by my loud phone's ringing, I'm thinking my dad has called back, but looking at the screen, I see my best friend's name. My first thought was, "It's going to be a fun night." She lives three houses away and probably has plans for us to sneak out.

I swipe my finger across my screen to answer. I put my phone to my ear, and unexpectedly, I hear unintelligible cries. Only understanding bits and pieces, I say, "Please, slow down. I can't understand you."

Then it becomes clear, "He killed himself. I can't breathe. I'm outside your house."

Without another thought, I start moving my legs up through the hallway, up twenty stairs, right through the kitchen and out the door without a word to anyone in my house. My feet hit the cold concrete faster and faster. Looking up and only seeing black, I hear her broken cry grow louder and louder as I get closer and closer. When I finally reach her, my words just start coming out my mouth, "Are you okay? What happened?" Then I just shut up and wrap my arms around her. "I'm here. I'm sorry." I sob with her. I don't believe it. I don't want to.

After two minutes of just hugging and crying with no words, her sobbing calms down. Sounding like she couldn't cry anymore, slowing she says, "He was just hanging there. I thought he was playing, but when I grabbed his hand, it was cold, lifeless. I screamed for my mom and dad. I called the ambulance. My dad took him down."

The words felt like gunshots to my heart. It can't be real. I'm dreaming. I grew up with him. We had so many fun and crazy nights. I just talked to him a few days ago. I saw he was hurting, but he wouldn't talk to me.

Reading and rereading our past messages, I think, "Why didn't I text him back?" More memories flood my mind. The nights we cuddled and talked. He was my lifelong friend. He loved me. I loved him. Now I can't believe he's gone.

His sister, my best friend, stayed at my house for weeks. His funeral came. As we walked in, my heart was racing. Holding my best friend's hand, we walk up to the casket. I put a heart ring on his finger. She put lavender and weed all over. Crying the whole time, we just wanted to stay. RIP JS. We love you.



# numb

*written by I. M. at Manti Youth Academy*

Enjoy your feelings while they last because they might go away fast. I'm hollow. I seem to be unbothered, and nothing seems to phase me. As time passes, these things seem to turn me . . . numb.

From the time I was in kindergarten until now, it was always hard for me to make friends. At first, I tried being myself, but no one liked who "myself" was. Me, being the outcast, people were always trying to fight me, and being back stabbed turned me . . . numb.

They say — Home is where the heart is. But where is home? My heart is buried beneath the rocks and dirt without a tombstone. No tombstone to remember how it feels to have a heart. Left in the cold outside, moving place to place, and running away turned me . . . numb.

Drugs are temporary pain relievers. Yes, they make me feel alive as they kill me slowly. The pills and smoke make me feel some sense of hope. It fills the void. Taking psychedelics to escape reality, watching it done in front of me, and selling drugs to make money turned me . . . numb.

Love and life are beautiful things, but they can also be dangerous things that can destroy you. Love gives you a reason to live your life. Life gives you a reason to love. Love is something life doesn't have enough of. People saying — I love you — when they don't mean it, the kind of struggle life throws at me, and not having love in life turned me . . . numb.

Enjoy your feelings while they last because they might go away fast. I'm hollow. I seem to be unbothered, and nothing seems to phase me. As time passes these things seem to turn me . . . numb.

# Living with Brown Skin

*written by D. D. at Canyons Youth Academy*

It was in my neighborhood. It was a “Karen,” a racist white female. This fiftyish female was asking me, “Why are you going to the back of your house?”

I told her, “Don’t worry about it.”

She said, “That’s my friend’s house. I am going to call the police.”

I told her, “Get out of my face. This is my house. I am supposed to be here. This is my side of this duplex. I don’t know your friend.”

Once when I was at TRAX with my cousin, I was judged by the color of my skin. I am a fifteen-year-old Hispanic male with medium brown skin. Basically, this one old white man was saying to us, “You are not supposed to be here. You supposed to be in Mexico. You don’t belong here.” Then my cousin started yelling, “Leave us alone. Get out of here.” The old white guy left.

One time at 7-Eleven I was accused of stealing M&Ms. M&Ms? The white clerk said, “You stole some candy.”

I was just choosing between Snickers and M&Ms. She wanted to search me and call the cops. I told her, “Check the cameras. I did not steal M&Ms.” Why did she single me out? Because of the way I dress? The way I look? Apparently, the snack I chose.

Just last night, I was at my soccer game, and this one white kid fouled me. I was obviously still on the ground. Then the kid stood over me talkin’, “Get up off the ground.”

So, I stood up and told him, “Get out of my face.”

Then I pushed him, and he started calling me, “Black.” He was like, “You’re black. You’re f\*\*\*ing black.” And he was laughing at me. Once I stood up with my angry face, the laughter stopped. He knew I was serious. My skin color doesn't impact my playing. That red card was worth it.

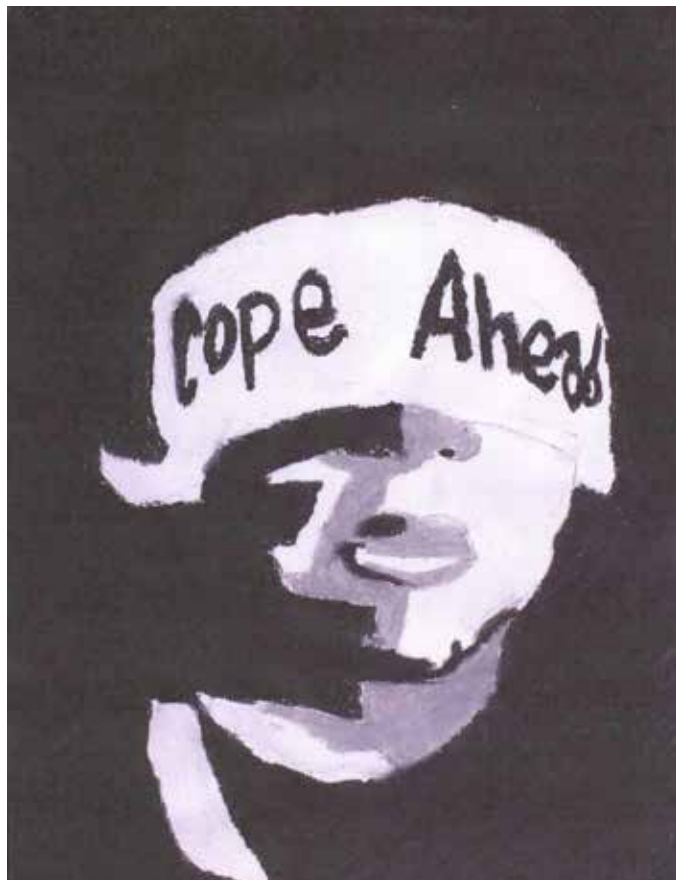
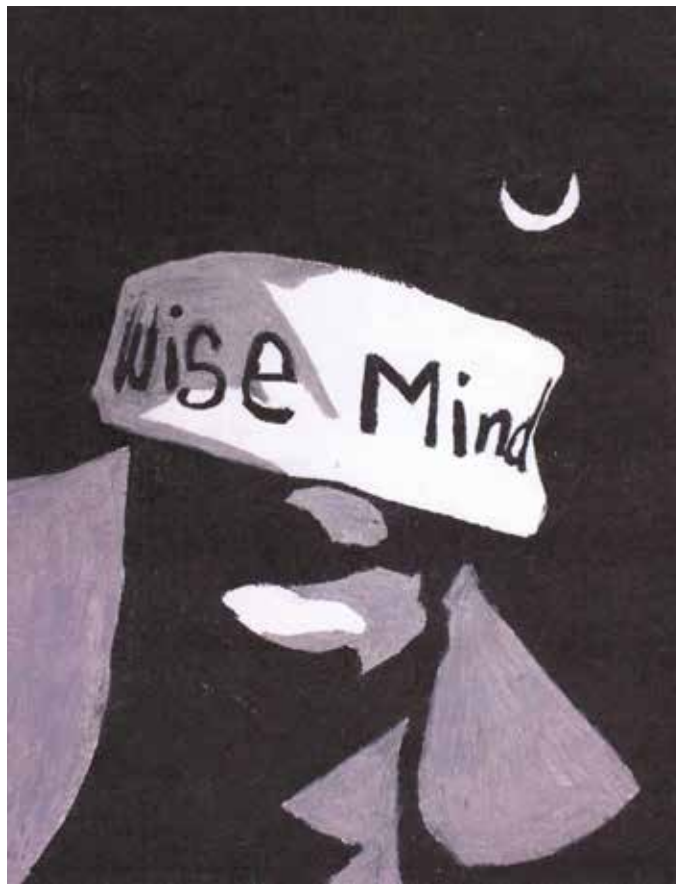
Some people look at me as if I'm a bad person because of the way I dress with my baggy pants and my hoodie and because of the people I'm surrounded by. In reality, the white people who judge me look past the good and focus on all the wrong things. I feel like if I wasn't judged as often as I am, a lot of people would look at me differently.

I want to be seen like a normal person. I have brown skin. I have family connections to Mexico. I play soccer. I go to school. I am more than where I live, where I choose to travel, and what snack I want at the store. I am a goodhearted person, not a criminal. I need to stay positive and not listen to the negative, racist things they say to me.

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HONORARY RECOGNITION





*Created at Mill Creek Youth Center*

# Gunshots Turn into Teardrops

written by S. F. at Manti Youth Academy

When I was twelve, I was tired of the abuse. I was strong for my age, but not nearly as strong as my mom's friends. After nine years of sexual abuse, I was fed up. I needed to find a way to protect me and my mom from her abusive crackhead friends. I was desperate so I went to my uncle's house to talk to his friend Tom.

I told Tom what has been going on, and he said, "I can help you, but you will have to prove yourself first. Your mom's boyfriend is a Blood, and if you join my set, the Crips, I will have people watching your mom's house 24/7."

I asked, "What do I have to do?"

The answer to that question was that I got jumped in.

After joining things got better, and no one messed with me or my mom. I got into drug dealing, so I was making money. Tom and his friend Tim had become like brothers to me. Things were finally looking up in my life, but that can always change in the blink of an eye.

Me and the set were walking down the street going to the crib. None of us noticed that we were being followed until we heard the car speed around the corner behind us. We looked back, and I saw the sun glint off a gun that was sticking out of the back driver's side window. We ran, but the car was gaining on us. I looked back again, and they fired. BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! I felt a searing hot pain in my left hip. I had been shot.

Tom started to drag me into an alley. I was screaming at him, "Stop! See if everybody is okay!"

Tom got into my face. A deathly calm had glazed over his eyes. Quietly he said, "There already dead. Now hold still or you'll be dead too."

Tim joined us, took off the rag that Tom was using to cover my wound. Then Tom stuck a glowing knife, that they had heated up with a small blowtorch lighter, into my wound to stop the bleeding. The pain was so intense that I started to black out. The last thing that I heard was Tom saying was, "Gunshots turn into teardrops."

When I woke up a couple of hours later, still in the alley, the rest of my set who had survived, told me that Tom had died from bleeding out. He was shot in the chest. They said, "He would not do anything to help himself until you woke up so he could make sure you were okay."

I started to cry remembering his last words — *Gunshots turn into teardrops.*

I will never forget the sacrifice that he made for me that day.

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HONORARY RECOGNITION

# What I Miss

*written by H. M. at Slate Canyon Youth Center*

I wake up every morning to a brick wall, a great reminder of all my mistakes, loneliness, and all the hardship and pain I've put my mom through, all the things I'm missing out on, and all the things that I miss.

My mother was the only person I could trust growing up, the only person I didn't fear to be around as a young kid, my only true support. As a child, I dreaded going to school. There was so much fear of the unknown, humiliation, and pain. I was bullied a lot growing up; I was beat up, thrown off the top of the playground, called countless names, had my pants pulled down, everything in the book, and I feared leaving the house. But no matter what might happen on any given day, I always had my mother. She always comforted me and made me feel like life was worth the struggle.

As I grew up, I started getting into trouble in school because I wanted to be liked and valued by more than just one person; I wanted friends. I would seek attention by acting out, trying to be the class clown, or fighting. My mom would get frustrated with me, and I didn't know how to tell her I was tired of feeling alone when she wasn't around. So, with my silence came punishment because I only knew how to get attention negatively. I imagine my mom probably thought punishment was the only way she could possibly make me the man she knew I could be.

It didn't work though. Instead, it pushed me away from the only person I knew loved me, so eventually I started running away. I wanted my mom to see how I felt. I wanted her to know I felt like I was unworthy of her love, and I felt as if I was losing the most important person in my life.

I was finally placed in an overnight facility called Shelter. I overdosed on my medication there and had to be put in the hospital. And with every desperate cry for help, my actions made me feel more and more distant from my mom. Eventually I started getting locked up, and with each facility stay, I pushed my mom farther away to the point she has had to stay distant to protect her own feelings. At the time, all I felt was inadequate and angry, knowing I was the reason for my mom's pain. After everything my mom has done for me, how could I be the one to make her hurt?

When people ask me what I miss most about freedom, after twenty-seven months, I don't say things like a normal bed, a decent meal, or my friends. What I miss the most is my cheerleader, my support, my everything — my mom, and the look of happiness she will have in her eyes when I've changed my life for good.

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FINALIST

# Last Words

*written by B. R. at Slate Canyon Youth Center*

Waking up has always been a struggle, but at least when I was free, I had a warm bed and music to help me get through the night. Now it's different. I wake up to white walls that are covered in word art, in a cold room no matter the season, and a locked door. This is my life for the next while, a long while, and the only thing that made it better was getting a call from my stepdad and my aunt. We would laugh and talk about the day I would get released and things that we would do.

I've always loved my aunt. She took care of me for a while and helped me as much as she could to get to where I needed to be. I loved my cousin too. They meant a lot to me.

I struggle with dreams and PTSD whenever I sleep. Usually I'm getting chased, or I end up dying, but mostly it's things from my past. Most nights are just another night, but this time was different. I remember the cold chill of the night and the tall brick building I was standing on top of. The dark grey clouds grew as I neared the edge. Then suddenly I jumped over the edge. While I was falling, a man that I could only hear but not see was telling me it was going to be okay. It was a weirdly long dream. It was like saying goodbye in a way but to whom I don't know. Right before I hit the ground, I woke up. I was sweating and cold, too cold, almost freezing with a lingering feeling of loss and confusion.

I just couldn't tell what it was, and it took a while to finally get over the thought that something was wrong. Then I fell back asleep with no dream this time. Some time passed and I awoke, went to school, did what I needed to do, and drew for most of the day.

The best part of my day finally came. I wouldn't know yet, but it would be the worst part of my day. Sitting by the phone waiting for it to ring, I knew something was wrong when my mother was on the line instead of my stepdad. She said he had committed suicide, and my aunt had been caught killing my three-year-old cousin in a canyon; he was dead too. Rage filled my body. I put the receiver down so hard I ended up breaking the phone. It was all too surreal. I thought it was a joke, a mistake, but it wasn't. It was my new reality.

Having people die while you sit and stare at walls is the worst news to get while being locked up. I'm so glad my last words to them were kind and loving. I'm grateful I ended my last words with "I love you."

FINALIST

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# I Woke Up

written by A. M. at Gemstone/SLVYC

*I woke up. Where was I? Where did the time go? Why was I bleeding?*

During the summer of 2021, I started using some minor drugs, like weed. I was having fun catching the high. Then I started having some laced drugs, like meth. It wasn't until later that it got worse.

As this happened my relationship with my family got worse. So, I started running away. I was chasing a high, a high I couldn't quite catch, only to go home and hit a low. I felt like the black sheep of my family. It didn't feel like "family" when I was with them, so I ran with people to fill that void, but I didn't know that those people would make my life so confusing. They pushed me to keep running and catching the high. So, I did.

One day I decided to go home with a boy, Kyler. We went to his house, got high and had a good time. But it got worse when he gave me more. Then more boys came to the house. I passed out due to all the drugs I was given, only to wake up to boys laughing and telling me to take more. I was so confused that I just wanted to go back to sleep. So, I took the drugs.

I woke up. The hours were just a blur. Where did the time go? Why was I bleeding? What had happened? Kyler laughed at my confusion. It was Sunday. Two days had passed! I kinda figured why I was bleeding, but I really didn't care at the time. But I still wondered: Who did this? How many?

I barely made it home. I was still under the influence, but I made it. Surprisingly, after that I kept going back because I still needed that high. I stopped eating, and I didn't even know what I was taking anymore.

It wasn't till I got caught up with cops that I understood the trauma I went through. I finally understood the damage I had done to myself, mentally and physically. I got back home from the detention center and looked in the mirror. I looked horrible. My ribs were poking out. My hair looked so thin, and one of my teeth was aching. And I was hurting on the inside, emotionally and physically. Whatever happened that night caused a lot of trauma. I was broken. I should've been dead.

I woke up again. I was in a group home, but I felt safe. I finally understood what meth does to me. I was ready to change. I cut my hair, but it is now longer and thicker. I gained much-needed weight. My family life was good. I was opening up about my trauma. I was healing. My life wasn't perfect. It was not all put together. I had a long way to go. But I had started. My life was going to be good.

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FINALIST

# Drugs and Death

*written by A. L. at Slate Canyon Youth Center*

I was three when I met my best friend. We lived next to each other, but he grew up a lil' different because he had both parents. I only had my uncle, but the one thing we did have in common: our families were addicted to drugs and gangs. My uncle tried to keep stuff like that away, but I went behind his back and smoked and hung out with gangs.

My best friend and I did everything together. We smoked together, sold together, even robbed people together, but it all changed when his Big Homie told us we could make more selling meth and heroin. We were only eight when we began to push it like no other. Big Homie showed us the best way to make money; it was fast and easy. We hadn't tried it ourselves, but one day my boy and I were chilling, and he said, "Hey, what does meth even feel like?"

"I don't know," I replied. "My mom is addicted to it, so I'm pretty sure it's good."

"H-m-mmm, I'll be back, right?" He came back with a pipe. That was the beginning of the end. We began pushing more to pay for our next fix. We also started to kick it with older girls, but we were just using them to smoke their stuff, so we wouldn't spend our cash.

One day we were leaving their house, which was about a block away from my friend's house, when we heard gunshots. We ran down the street to his house, and when we got to his door, it was wide open. We ran inside and went to the kitchen where we found his mom dead on the floor. My friend lost it. He started crying and punched the wall. It took him several minutes to calm himself enough to call the cops. A week later, we found out it was Big Homie that shot his mom.

After that, we started to kick it with the homegirls a lot more. They introduced us to shooting up heroin. My friend had really gone downhill ever since his mom was killed, and he became hooked fast. When I would go over to his house, I usually find him passed out with a shoelace wrapped around his arm. I hated seeing him like that, so I would take his stash in an attempt to stop him. It got so bad that I didn't want to leave him alone, but I would have to go home after school because I didn't want my uncle to find out what I was doing.

Then one day I went over to his house to find him lying there with a needle in his arm. He looked ashen gray. I ran to him, yelling his name, took the needle out and shook him. The last time I saw him was as the people from the morgue zipped up the black body bag and took him away.

FINALIST

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*Created at Odyssey Adolescent*

# Light within the Darkness

*written by A. D. R. at Detention/SLVYC*

Throughout my life for the longest time there was only darkness, so dark that I didn't ever believe that I'd ever see light. At a very young age, like most, I realized that I was different from the other kids. At my former elementary, junior high and high schools, the kids were more wealthy and confident than I was. Murder, poverty, violence, and discrimination made the world that I lived in.

Growing up was difficult for me. I got jumped into a gang at the age of thirteen. As I was growing up, I wanted to get away from the lifestyle I was heading towards, living in the current community I lived in. Unfortunately, I was taking the same steps as everyone else trying to make it out of the trenches, blindly.

I started getting money in all the wrong ways. I tried to make music for a career, but I never really dedicated myself to sitting down and working on accomplishing my goals. I was too distracted by woman and drugs. I told myself that I was still young and had plenty of time to rap later on in life.

Furthermore, I was hanging out with some "friends" one night, and I committed a horrible crime because I felt that I needed to protect one of my friends. I ended up falling hard and deep into the world I was trying to escape. I became a huge part of it. Two days after that night, I was incarcerated.

I found myself deeper into the darkness. This was my first time in, and being away from my family and friends took away most of the light. After three months of being in DT, I began to realize that I needed being incarcerated in my life, needed having reflection time to figure out who I was and wanted to become. This time of reflection was my ticket out of that dark life. I started writing poems and songs regarding my emotions and hoping someday to be able to publish the poems and songs. But I did not think I would be out anytime soon.

Now after being incarcerated six months, I recently discovered that there was hope and the possibility that I could be out soon due to the fortunate way things played out. Now I have hope that I can be out soon and publish my poems and songs. My family and my creativity are the light in all this darkness. Being incarcerated made a stronger bond between my family and me than I ever thought could be possible. We did not see eye to eye with each other and did not communicate at all except when I was being dishonest. Honesty matters. Now that we communicate, we have built trust with one another and hope to make up for the time we have lost. The darkness of my life comes from my past mistakes, but the light revolves around these new beginnings.

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# The Worst Day of My Life

*written by I. V. at Detention/SLVYC*

When I was in seventh grade, the worst thing ever happened to me. This was the worst day of my life. I just got out of school and was on the bus when I looked at my phone and saw a text message from a girl named Diana.

The message said: "Hey, are you doing anything after school?"

I replied: "No."

Diana replied: "Do you want to hang out?"

We had never met in-person. I replied: "Yeah, I'm down."

She asked: "What time do you want to meet up, and where?"

I said: "After 5:00 o'clock at the Midvale City Park."

So, I started getting ready. After I was done, I told my mom where I was going. My mom said, "Okay."

So, I headed out. The park was only a ten-minute walk from my house. When I got to the park, I pulled out my phone and texted her: "Are you here yet?"

Five minutes later she replied: "Yes, I'm here."

I asked: "Where you at?"

She replied: "I'm in the parking lot."

I looked around, but I only saw a guy in a car. I walked over to the parking lot. Right when I passed the car, the man jumped out. He pulled me into the backseat of his car and started beating me. He took all my clothes off and raped me. I was crying and trying my hardest to get him off me, but I was too small and weak. I couldn't get him off.

After thirty minutes of getting beat and raped, I finally got away. I ran back home as fast as I could. I was crying. When I got home, I ran into my room. My mom came in and asked, "What's wrong?"

I said, "Nothing, I'm fine."

My mom kept nudging me to talk to her, but I wouldn't talk. That night I couldn't sleep. The next day was a school day. I was very tired. I couldn't even keep my eyes open, but I had to act like nothing was wrong. People kept asking me, "What's wrong?"

I just kept telling them, "I'm fine."

The next two years I couldn't get it out of my mind. I was always blaming myself, always beating myself up over it. It got to the point where I was very depressed. I didn't want to live anymore. My mom started seeing changes. I wouldn't go to school. I would just sleep all day.

Then one day mom signed me up for therapy. The first couple of sessions I didn't talk. It took about nine sessions for me to get comfortable talking about things with my therapist. He ended up telling my mom. After I talked with my therapist, I felt relieved; my chest felt lighter. I felt like I was getting stronger and stronger each time we talked about it. I was getting healthier mentally. What happened to me that day made me stronger than I had ever been.

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FINALIST

# A Life of Running

*written by P. C. at Decker Lake Youth Center*

Most of my life I've spent running from something. I'm not talking about running from someone but running from my emotions or my neglect. When I was seven years old, my pops died. My mom turned to drugs, and I lost all connection to most my emotions. After my pops died, the only emotion I ever felt was anger. I was so mad at everything that a lot of my past is still a blur.

When I would watch my mom lose herself in the drugs, I would run from feeling sad by telling myself that I was mad, not sad. Eventually, I would tell myself this so much, all I would feel is anger. When I was sad, I was mad; happy, mad. I never let myself show vulnerability. I thought nobody deserved to see my emotions. When I did show that little bit of vulnerability, I always got taken advantage of. I promised myself never to show anybody my true feelings.

I hated being home because I would see my mama suffering as she tried to numb herself with drugs. I got used to seeing my mom doze off at the table, unable to lift her head up, with her face in her food. I hated seeing my mom that way. I'd try to find every reason not to be home. That's how I started running with my gang.

I got lost mentally. Eventually I ended up calling the streets my home because the streets were not as ruthless as my real home. I lost the purpose of my life, hurting people because nobody tried to help my hurt. I picked up warrants. Running from the cops, I was out to kill anyone who disrespected my hood. I needed help, but nobody would help me.

It didn't help that I wouldn't speak to anyone about anything. I wanted to forget my past. I didn't want anybody knowing what I was going through. It was nobody's business. I dug myself a deep hole, and it looked like I wasn't going to get out. My mindset almost seemed fixed. I always thought about things the way I would in the streets. I kept running. I lost everything. I would get locked up, get out and go right back on the run.

All I wanted deep down was a place to call home, but I never found that place, no matter where I ran. After some time, I realized what my anger and aggression were causing. My actions were the reason I couldn't find this so-called "home." I thought maybe if I stopped running, I would probably find "home." Being locked up stopped my running and helped me reflect on my past.

Now I'm about to get released. I'm ready to restart my search for a home. This time I'm not going to run when things get hard. I'm going to take my time. I have learned from my past mistakes. I'm done running.

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*Created at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center*

# Beyond the Streets

written by M. R. at Decker Lake Youth Center

When I was a little youngster growing up, things were easy but tough at the same time. It was tough to do good and be stable, but it was easy to be a little *travieso* causing *desmadre* (troublemaker causing trouble). I used to be a troublemaker starting out in school. Spitting at teachers and bullying other kids. Every time the school reported an incident to my parents, I'd be scared expecting some lashes down my back. Momma always used to say in Spanish, "Wait till your father arrives."

I used to double up underwear because it wasn't fun getting whipped. Going to school with some bruises and lashes got teachers trippen, but it was just a normal thing for me and my other friends. Never mess with the Hispanic parents; they're quick to knock the sense out you. Growing up, I used to always love playing soccer. Even had a dream to become an astronaut. Those times I didn't care about how I dressed or acted. I was just a little nerdy boy.

It all went downhill when my parents split. I was drowning with depression and anger. Momma switched me schools, but it was the only option because my dad kicked us out of his place. As I started school, I met some homies, but they weren't the type of friends I had before. These were some *cholos* I was hanging around with. I got caught into their ways, changing me and the good being I was. I gave up sports and started failing school just to ditch and kick it with the homies. Smoked weed for the first time, hit my first beer run, started dressing like them, black T and 501 Levi's, and even tatted up my face as an honor of my criminal activities.

At that point I just lost my good self, like an angel fallen, becoming confused and lost. I gave up the good things for a life of suicide on the streets. Momma saw the changes in me. She tried every way to prevent me from going down a deep path. I was just too blind to see the support. After being involved in shootouts, stabbings, rumbles, and in and out of incarceration, I have a real perspective of how the street goes. Back then before I knew gangs, I thought it was just for the looks, but this is real life. The streets are coldhearted.

I am currently incarcerated facing a three-to-five-year sentence. I'm only 18 years old and have gone through traumatic events, including me getting stabbed in the face. Now my goal is just to show my mother my educational progress and how I have changed my ways. It's a good thing to appreciate your loved ones. Even though I was blind to the support my family tried giving me, I am still thankful for them for putting the effort in to change me. Beyond the streets, I need to make a new start.

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# What Happened Last Night?

written by E. K. at Odyssey Adolescent

The love of my life, my best friend, was Xanax. When we met, I was just a little girl, playing with dolls and then tagging up walls. Then Xanax, my new friend. You put on a front, and your innocence drew me in. You got past me without a fight. Every line, every bite, every swallow made me hungry for more.

“Whoa, you really need to slow down,” they would say. But that made me want you more, just to prove them wrong. To prove that I was indestructible even to overdosing . . . until . . . it happened. Shallow breaths, pale skin, big blue eyes twitching, breaths getting slower and slower.

July 25, 2020. It was a warm, bright day, with magenta roses blooming and the sun roaring. I was ready for my fifteenth birthday at my mom’s boyfriend’s fancy house. Beers and bottles in the cooler. Xanax in the bag and green getting rolled up. Yeah, this was the life. Gazed out at the ginormous backyard, 9-foot swirly slide into a 10-foot-deep shiny blue pool and a huge trampoline and basketball court. It couldn’t get any better than this.

Came 7:00 p.m., everyone started to arrive. Peering around, everything was under control, and everyone seemed to be having fun. People were kickin’ it by the firepit and doing 360 flips into the pool. Me personally, I was kickin’ it with my other best friend weed in my hand. Eventually, after a lot of meeting people that I had no idea who they were, my homie got there. We dabbled each other up and grinned.

“I got you some tequila, Fam. Your favorite!” he said.

I gazed at the bottle in awe, like it was my soulmate. “I literally love you!” I exclaimed.

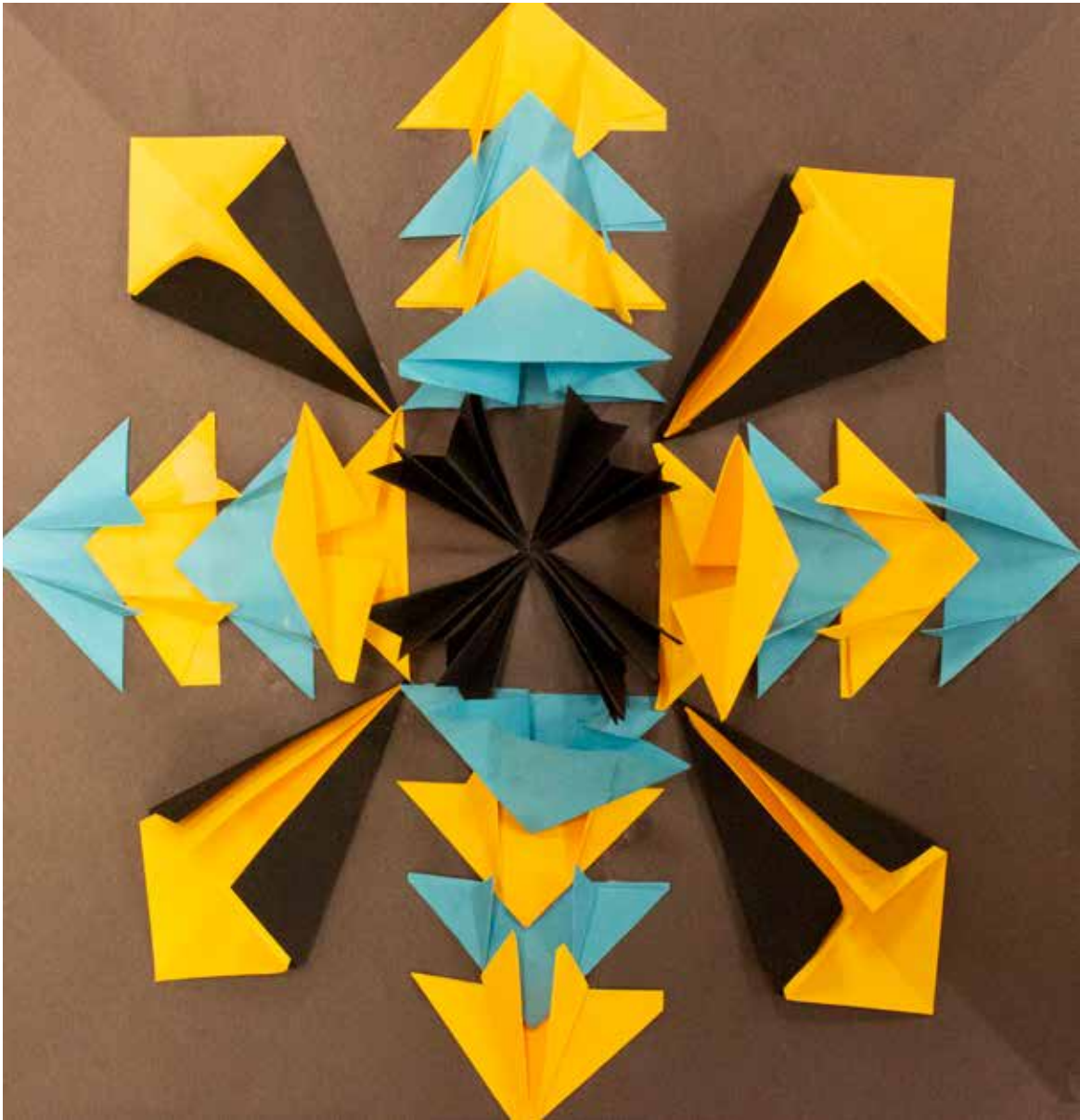
I already had a couple Xanax bars in my system, but who was I kidding? I couldn’t pass up my good friend *Don Julio*. Shot after shot, I was feeling good.

“Yo, slow down, bro,” they were saying. But screw that. It was my birthday for crying out loud. I should live it up, am I right? Ninth shot in, I let it sit. The warmth in my stomach brought a smile to my face. Now, I’ll be honest with you, I don’t remember much after this point.

What I do remember is, we lived that up, except “live” probably isn’t the correct word because the next morning I woke up in a pile of my vomit mixed with blood. My words slipped out, “W-what happened last night?” At that point my friends drove me to the ER. I had overdosed. After that I kept using, but I was also thinking: Is this really the way I want to live my life? A year after that, the court threw me into rehab. Now I’m thinking I want to do better for myself and my family. I don’t want to wake up anymore, wondering: What happened last night?

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FINALIST



*Created at Mill Creek Youth Center*

# Alcohol, Problem or Solution

*written by A. G. at Odyssey Adolescent*

There's that one shot. You know you can't keep going but you do. The splash of alcohol on my tongue, the warmth in my stomach and the chills down my spine told me that everything was gonna be all right. When I first held you, I knew I had found my solution. I underestimated the power you had over me. You pulled me in, not by the truth, but by the false comfort you provided with every fix.

I grew up with you. By the time I was ten, I saw you ruin my stepdad who was so important to me. I told myself I would never let myself make the same mistake. Fast forward three years, and I ended up making that mistake.

One summer night when I was thirteen, I got invited to my first party. I remember walking in and seeing people dancing and having a good time. I went and sat on the couch, not knowing what to do. I had told myself I would never do drugs and was sticking to that. Then at this party people started making fun of me for not drinking or smoking. I gave in because it was easier to just join the crowd. My first drink led to my first black out.

But after that night I remembered alcohol took away my shyness. It gave me a warm and happy new feeling that freed me up to do anything. I could talk to anyone with no fear. After that night, alcohol had given me this sense of power, and I began drinking more. It didn't matter what time of the day or night; I was always sipping. I started going to parties and meeting new people, making new friends. From thirteen to sixteen, I was drinking and loving life.

When I was sixteen, I got caught up at this party for fighting. I ended up getting seven charges and sent to DT for the first time. I was released the day before Christmas. When I got home, I went straight to the bottle. I was in and out of incarceration for five months. Finally, I was sent to a rehab facility to get help for my addiction.

When I came to rehab, I still didn't think I had an alcohol problem. The only thing that made life livable was alcohol. I loved to drink till my life hurt no more.

After five months in rehab, my desire to drink has left me. Now I have faith in my future, and I'm not ashamed of my past. Alcohol will always be a part of my life; a part of my past, not my future. I'm so grateful for the chance to live free from the obsession of alcohol. My addiction led me to rehab. Rehab showed me how great life is and how much the world has to offer me. I thought alcohol was my solution, not my problem. Now I know the truth.

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FINALIST

# No Regrets

*written by K. B. at Odyssey Adolescent*

When I was twelve, my mother and I were driving home from my soccer tournament in St. George. During our drive home, Grandma and Grandpa were phoning and texting us and acting a bit strange. For some reason they were rushing us to get home. We told them, "We are going as fast as we can."

Every thirty minutes our phones would receive a text asking, "How far away are you?" My grandma has always been anxious about us kids, always asking the same questions repeatedly. It was just Grandma being Grandma I told myself.

Finally, we made it home. I was exhausted. As soon as I got inside, my grandma came up and tried to give me a big hug, asking me, "How was it? Are you okay?"

I answered, "Grandma, let me get in the house first."

So, I walked away and went to the bathroom. While I was washing off, my grandparents came to the door and said, "We have to run an errand." Then Grandma said to me, "I love you so much." The way she said it concerned me.

Of course, I said, "I love you too."

Later that evening I asked my mom, "Where did they go?"

My mom told me Grandma had to go to the hospital. As soon as she said that, my heart dropped. My grandma smoked cigarettes, and I always asked her to stop because I was always worried about the day it would catch up to her. Maybe today was that day. I tried to sit with my feelings and tell myself it would be okay. I would ask Grandpa if Grandma would be okay. My grandpa would say, "I just don't know." That made my mom and me burst into tears. I had been crying on and off the whole time, but once my grandpa seemed to be losing hope, that was when it felt like I lost mine. I remember bawling my eyes out all night and begging God not to take her.

A few days later, Grandma started to get a lot better. They were able to drain the swelling from her legs and get her heart back to working properly. The doctor told us she was going to be okay. When I could finally visit her, I just remember crying and giving her the biggest hug. She got emotional as well. I hung out with her for a while. I was so thankful. I never thought I would be able to do that again.

Eventually Grandma got to come home, and she is alive and well. Ever since that experience she hasn't smoked another cigarette. To this day, whenever I get home or whenever I leave or whenever a family member leaves, I make sure to give them a hug and tell them, "I love you." I don't want to make a mistake that I will regret the rest of my life. Always be satisfied with your goodbyes.

FINALIST

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# My Best Friend

*written by A. R. at Odyssey Adolescent*

When I was seven years old, I lost my best friend, my dad. I am the first child of five so attention is not something I got very often, but my dad always was able to make me feel seen. He made sure we never felt alone. Even when he was in and out of prison, I never felt unloved.

My mother chose drugs over her children. My mom and dad would fight often; sometimes it even got physical. The last fight they would get into was the worst. My dad wanted to take me for a ride, but my mom didn't agree. As they yelled back and forth, I tried to stop the argument, asking, "Dad, can you please come lay with me?"

Little did I know that was the last time I'd hug my dad. I can remember waking up in the middle of the night. Everything quiet. Everyone was sleeping, but I couldn't find my parents. I walked out to find my aunt and uncle sleeping on the couch.

I picked up the phone and dialed my mom's number. My mom answered, "Your dad's been in an accident. The whole left side of his face is broken." Later I found out that he couldn't speak, move or breath on his own. Even though I was young, I understood death, but I wasn't prepared for it to take my only friend. After hearing the news, I laid down, held the phone close to my chest and cried. I cried, begging for my dad not to die, repeating the words, "Please don't die."

I woke up the next morning, and my dad was in a coma. The swelling was so bad they had to wait for it to go down before operating. I walked into that cold hospital, my heart racing, my hands clammy. When I got to his room, I saw my family sitting with tears flowing. Before the doctor came, I knew this would be the last time I saw my dad.

He was hooked up to a machine, tubes coming out of everywhere. I wanted desperately to make the moment count, but I couldn't even touch him. That was the last time I saw my father alive. Walking out of his room, I saw all my dad's close family in tears. My heart sunk to the floor; I knew he wasn't going to wake up. The next time I would see my dad, he would be in a casket, stitches going across his head. I touched him. He was ice cold.

Losing my dad at such a young age, I never had a good father figure to show me how men are supposed to treat woman. That made it so I choose men who abuse me. I wasn't ever able to understand why my dad was taken from me so early; but as I get older, I realize things happen for a reason. I know heaven must have needed him more than I did.

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FINALIST

# Little Did I Know

written by T. B. at Odyssey Adolescent

When I was fourteen, I was at the park skating with my friends and having a great time. Little did I know, when a car pulled up, and I heard my name called that my life would change in a big way. When I approached the car, I recognized my older brother's friends. At that point I thought I was going to have a friendly conversation with them until they pulled out a vape, and my heart dropped because I had never seen a vape, and I was scared. And the next thing, they said, "Hit this vape, or we'll kick your ass."

At first, I was just trying to get away from the vape, but then these guys kept on having me vape. So, I stopped being afraid and began thinking, "I already did it. It won't hurt to do it again." Little did I know, even though the vape contained just nicotine, this moment would affect my life.

Over time I started vaping even more. Vaping helped with my anxiety and depression. I thought vaping would solve my problems. Soon I got in with the wrong crowd. It was crazy to think how fast I changed. I went on to vape weed in a couple of weeks, and my attitude took a turn. I became angry and mean.

When my parents figured out that I was vaping weed, I started fighting with them and telling them, "I hate you." I was angry with them because they found a vape in my room and were trying to help me stop vaping. That made me hate them even more. Me fighting with my parents made me really depressed because I just felt horrible afterwards. Then I just kept on using even more. Eventually my parents put me in therapy that included drug testing. Little did I know, but I soon found out, after the testing, that I had the highest level of weed possible in my system.

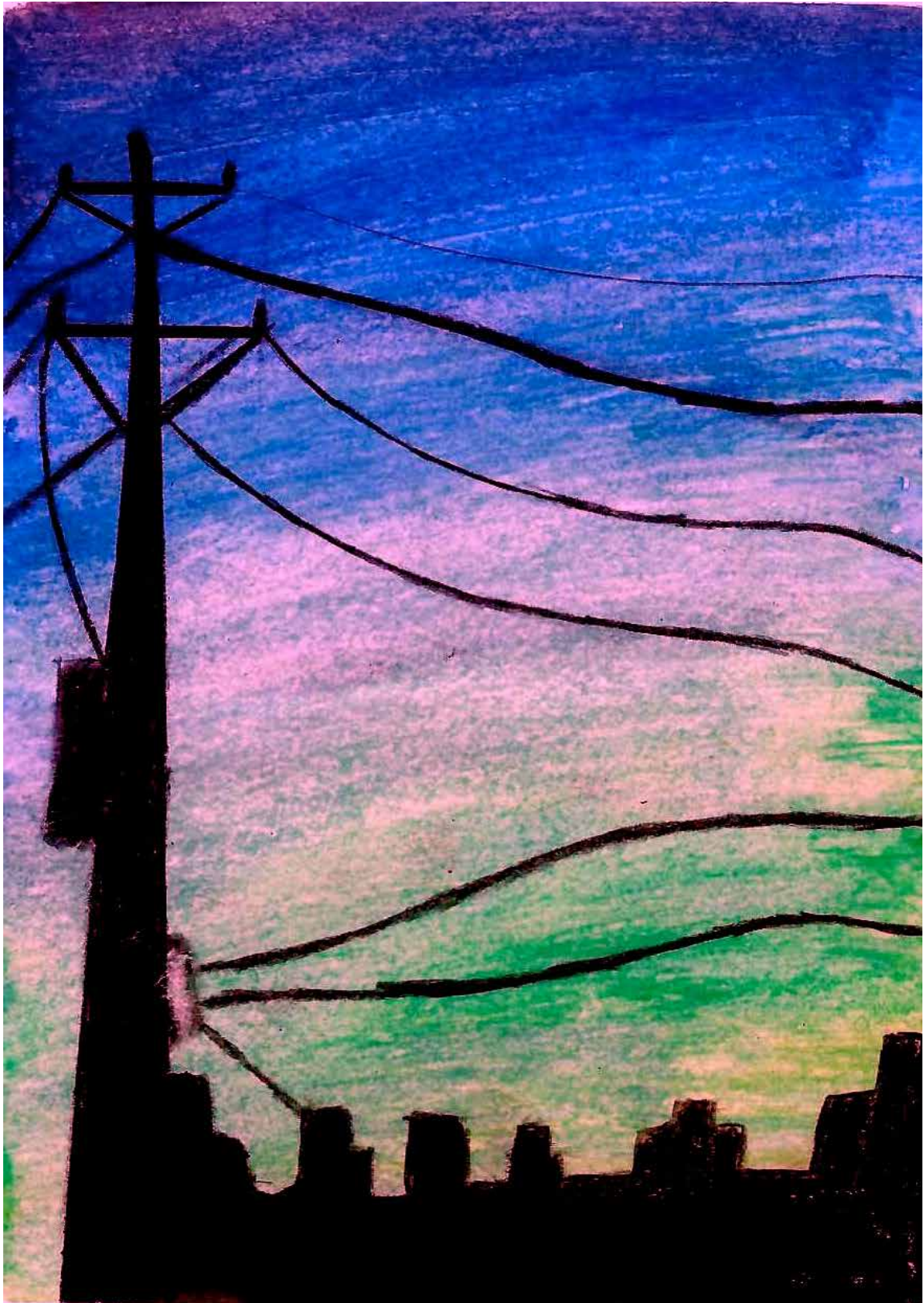
After a while I started playing football but got suspended from football for six weeks for drinking. Football is my favorite sport. I soon figured out that I could not vape or drink and play football. Just when I got back into football, my parents put me in rehab. I was depressed to miss the football season. I would do anything including going to rehab, just to get back to football and finish my season.

Going to rehab has me thinking about many things: *Why did I keep on using? Why did I let those guys make me vape? Why did I fight with my parents? Why did I let this little thing take over my life?*

I have been in rehab a month now, and I have learned how to control my anger and how to control my boundaries with my vaping friends. I don't know how this will turn out, but I hope I can get back to football and my normal life.

FINALIST

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*Created at Odyssey Adolescent*

# A Good Heart

*written by N. C. at Odyssey Adolescent*

I was a quiet kid growing up. I didn't say much, probably because I'd get hit by my parents if I spoke up. Where I come from, out on the streets, you can't say nothing unless you want to get jumped or shot at. I hate people who lie about things like this. The ones who grew up near it would never brag about it. The fear keeps us quiet.

Once, I had some friends over from another neighborhood, and we heard gunshots outside. I saw fear in their eyes, and I realized my life was much different from theirs. I was embarrassed that I had to pretend to be scared because it was so common to me. I could never imagine why someone would think it was cool to be "ghetto." I've learned many good lessons from poverty, like being loyal and appreciating what you have, but I'd never wish it on somebody else.

"It ain't easy out here." That is why I started hanging with the wrong crowd, using drugs, and staying out late. I knew what I was doing upset my mom, but those friends made me feel accepted and protected. I started going deeper into that life, selling drugs, not because I liked it, but because it kept me from living on the streets.

Fast forward, I'm sixteen. Anyway, it started like any other day. I showered, threw on some jeans and make-up. I felt good. My friends on the phone were telling me, "Come outside." After ten minutes Dollar and Kim finally pulled up. Even though they were already messed up, our first stop was the liquor store. We were feeling pretty good now, smoking, listening to music as we swerved down the road. Through the haze of smoke, I remembered my mom telling me about a dream she had about me getting locked up. At the time, that was all it was, a dream, but it's funny how right moms can be.

The next thing I remember was hearing tires screeching and glass shattering as the car smashed into a palm tree. I saw Kim's face hit the dashboard, blood gushing out. "What the heck, Kim? You good?"

Dollar and I started arguing about what to do. We wanted to leave the scene, but we would have to move Kim's unconscious body into the car. We ended up dropping her. I never would have thought I'd chose freedom over my friend's life. I remember the devil whispering, "Leave her."

Dollar left but I decided to stay and deal with the consequences. I heard sirens, and soon the police were questioning me. I was begging them to help my friend. An ambulance came and took Kim away. She survived. I was arrested and taken to DT.

On that day I made some mistakes, but I did not leave Kim because I have a good heart, not because I didn't leave Kim but because I have empathy for others.

FINALIST

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# Highs and Lows

*written by E. M. at Canyons Youth Academy*

I've struggled with problems throughout my entire life; everyone has. No matter how little or how big, they still exist. Unfortunately, the world doesn't work in the way we want it to. I've always had a good life, a supportive home, but I have taken that for granted by overlooking how much I had and focusing on what I didn't have.

During my first year in high school, I adopted the irresponsible behaviors of my new fun friends; I wanted to fit in. It consumed my life. I lost all my friends from middle school. I focused on getting high more than on academics or responsibilities. My whole freshman year I was barely staying above the water.

My mental health was gradually destroyed until I felt like I couldn't try anymore. I tried giving it all up, and looking back at it, I'm glad that people cared about me enough to help me. At the end of my freshman year, I went into treatment for substance abuse. After about three months I came out of treatment more knowledgeable, but not necessarily a better person. I wanted to repeat the experiences of the last year.

After treatment I was drug tested so I had resorted to using random over-the-counter drugs that could not be detected like pain or cold meds. One night I had taken too much Benadryl. I wasn't trying to OD or anything like that; I genuinely just wanted to feel something. Instead, the drugs caused a complete psychotic episode, an extreme state of loss of reality. I was like that for hours. I thought I was going to die. I was seeing spiders on the wall, and my cat, who was not there, was randomly appearing all night. I forced myself to look at old photos and think of good memories. I couldn't imagine what I would do without them. I realized that all the mad moments make the good ones worth it and more valued. I contemplated calling 9-1-1, but I didn't want to get in trouble. At the same time, I didn't want to die.

Now three months into my sophomore year I am still struggling with who I want to be. It is the most weighing thought to figure out my future. I am continuously getting drug tested, but it helps me keep in line. However, I have always found ways around it. I am so desperate for something that can distract me from the reality that I have to change but I don't want to. I now understand that I cannot live the perfect life; it is unrealistic and naive. Having these negative and scary experiences have shaped me and the way I perceive life.

I continue to learn that not every problem can be solved by getting high. So now I am struggling with finding other ways to solve my setbacks in life instead of putting them aside. Will I ever change? Will I save myself?

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FINALIST

# The Loss of My Mother

*written by J. P. at Odyssey Adolescent*

I was six when the problems in my house began. One morning when I woke up, all I could hear was screaming and fighting. I was scared. I walked out of my room to see what was going on. I saw my mom screaming and throwing things at my dad. Confused, I went to get my ten-year-old sister. When I got to her room, she was crying, I had no idea she was just as scared and confused as I was, maybe even more so. We stayed in her room playing games and building Legos, trying not to think about the scary morning we were having. After a couple of hours, my mom stormed out of the house, drove away, and didn't come back for several hours. All of this was just the beginning.

The fighting and screaming continued for a few more weeks before Tom came. He was a friend of my parents who was in a rough spot and needed a place to stay for a while. This was the worst thing that could have happened to my family. When my parents would fight, my mom would go to Tom for comfort. This was all okay until we started catching them in the bathroom together while the shower was on. I was little enough that I didn't understand what that meant, but my sister did and would scream through the bathroom door at them. That made everything worse for my parents, and the fighting got worse. Eventually my parents decided to separate. My mom moved out. My parents had joint custody, but only when my mom was stable enough to care for us. At first, I didn't understand what "stable enough" meant. As I got older, I learned that my mom was not mentally healthy. She had schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, and addiction to drugs. Plus, she was still cheating on my dad with Tom.

It wasn't long before joint custody turned into a visit every other weekend and then a visit once a month. Before long the only contact we really had with our mom was a phone call on holidays. I always blamed my mom for everything that had happened, but as I got older and understood more, I realized I couldn't put the full blame on her. The drugs and the untreated mental illness took my mom from me. I especially blamed Tom for coming into our lives and getting my mom addicted to drugs.

It has now been four years since the last time I talked to or saw my mom. The only times I've heard her name or anything about her was when I heard about her latest stint in jail or her last relapse. It's always made me mad that she chose drugs over her children, but I know I can't blame it all on her. Deep down below that anger, I miss my mom. Someday it would be great to see her again.

FINALIST

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*Created at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center*

# Should I Find My Father?

written by A. A. at Manti Youth Academy

Something I lost and never found was, and still is, my father. I am a half-blood (yes, the term comes from Harry Potter), half-Hispanic and half-white. I see myself as Hispanic.

My Mom gave birth to me in Durango, Colorado, and my father didn't show up. I only remember seeing him twice. I remember seeing him in a photo with his huge hands supporting my head. It was the only photo I have with my dad, and it's an experience I don't remember at all.

The first time I was with him in person only lasted about three minutes in total. It was at night. I was about six years old, and my sister, about four years old, and my mom were there. We heard a knock at the door of our apartment. I was watching *Scooby-doo* on Netflix. When my mom opened the door, she found my father standing there, about two feet away, and his girlfriend a foot behind him, holding a *Lego* set. It was *Ninjago Lego*, and I only saw it in Wal-Mart. I hopped off the couch and walked over to the door. Then he came inside the doorway, knelt, and gave me the *Lego* set. I vaguely remember him saying something about the *Lego* and something else, but it wasn't audible. Then he and his girlfriend stood up and left. That was the last I saw of him.

A couple of days later I heard from my dad through my mom. My mom told him that I wanted an XBOX 360 game, *Assassins Creed 2*. So, then he called mom again and said, "Send him to Dino's gas station later tonight."

Mom and I went to Dino's, but when my mom and I got there, it was just his girlfriend waiting for us. She gave my mom the game, and then Mom handed it to me. It was one of the coolest games I ever saw. My Mom spoke with her for some time, and then his girlfriend left. While we were driving home, I thought that my dad was the coolest person ever. That was the last I ever heard from him or his girlfriend.

Now I am eighteen years old, and to this day, I don't know if I should go after him -- or not. I would like to find him although I don't know if I should. I have some doubts. He has never tried to be in my life, so he probably does not care. Plus, my family has told me that he is in a gang, and they don't want me around that bad influence. My head is saying that it is not logical to try and find him, but my heart is saying I would like to know my father and see him again. The most important question is: Should I find him? I think about that all the time.

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# My Broken Heart Was Healed

*written by M. G. at Manti Youth Academy*

One day I was looking for a girl to give my heart, and I did find a girl. Her name was Angel. She was the prettiest girl I have ever seen.

Then one day I was walking to class, and then I went in the classroom and sat down. During the class I got up to see where the door on the right side of the room lead to. I opened the door, and there was a class right next to my class. She was in that class. That was the first time I ever saw Angel. Then I stopped what I was doing.

The second I opened the door I saw her beautiful face. Then I fell in love with her. Then the next day I give her a note that said, "Will you be my girlfriend?"

Then it took her a little bit to think about. The next day I gave her another note that said, "Are you ready for a date? Yes, or no?"

Then she said, "Yes."

Then we started hanging out and holding hands in school. Then one day when we were outside by the soccer field, I kissed her for the first time. We rode the same bus to and from school, and we would hold hands on the bus and kiss when nobody was looking.

Then one day my friends told me that my girlfriend was cheating on me with another boy. That got me super mad. Then I told Angel that our relationship was not working out, so I broke up with her. Then I was heartbroken.

Soon after that I moved away to a place called Boys and Girls Ranch. That is where I met my new girlfriend Cathy, and she was the right one for me. Every day before Cathy and I would go to work on the ranch, we would kiss, and I would tell her I loved her. Cathy would tell me that she loved me too. We stayed together for about a year and are still together even though I had to move from New Mexico to Utah. Before I left, I gave Cathy a relationship ring and a necklace with a picture of me on it. She gave me a necklace with her picture on it. I still have it.

When I left the ranch, I had her phone number, and now every night I text her and tell her that I love her. And she texts me back and says she loves me. I will have to stay in Utah for one year, but when the year is over, I am going to get Cathy and bring her to Utah with me. I hope I can get married to Cathy and have kids. That will be my happy ending. The End.

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FINALIST

# Can This Really Be My Life?

written by M. K. at Manti Youth Academy

When I was born, January 16, 2003, my mom was happy, but my biological father, BC, wasn't. He wanted to get rid of me. All he wanted was the pleasure, like sex, money, and drugs. My mother told me that BC abused her and me from the beginning, physically, mentally, and emotionally. When I was finally old enough to walk and talk, my mom had had enough, but he wouldn't let us leave.

When I was four, he threw me onto the tile floor and broke my left arm. My mom came home that day to me crying with my face bruised. For me, I had been diagnosed with autism, so I didn't understand at the time, and I still don't. It's hard for me, and I think to myself, *"Can this really be my life? Is this how my childhood really was?"*

Now when my mom got us away from him, we went to live with my grandmother, but then that went downhill because my mom had to be deployed in Iran. Then when she left, my grandmother started beating me and drinking. I was like, *"Can this really be my life? People always hurting me?"*

Then my mom came back, and I didn't want to tell her. I was afraid of what my grandmother would do. But my mom could tell something was suspicious because of how I was acting, so she got me out of there. I was happy because I found out something new; I had a new dad! Mom met him in Iran, and he was in the United States Marines. I was so happy.

Then the next ten years were awesome. Then high school came and puberty and all that fun stuff. But it wasn't puberty that got in the way; it was the bullying and the abuse from all the other kids at school.

On the first day of ninth grade, I regretted getting on that school bus and so did my friend. All the students on the bus started making fun of me because of the way I dressed and my autism. I broke out crying. Then later that week my friend committed suicide because of this bullying.

I couldn't take it, so I got into fights. Then during the summer between freshman and sophomore year, something terrible happened to me. I got jumped, pistol-whipped and gang raped by a group of older high schoolers. I thought to myself, *"Can this really be my life?"*

Then I got sent to YHA Manti, and now I've been getting the help I need. But I have one thing to say. No matter how bad life gets for you — the struggles, the depression, the abuse, just know that there are people out there who are like you and will support you. Even now I think, *"Can this really be my life?"* Now I am getting help, support, and friendship. *"Can this be my life?"*

FINALIST

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Our tree became  
the talking tree  
of the fairy tale;  
legends and stories  
nested like birds  
in its branches.

*Willa Cather*

# Always Waiting

written by C. M. at Manti Youth Academy

*Waiting is patient.*

Sometimes it's hard to be patient, but it's also better to take our time. We all go through this because we want what we want, and we do this by pushing people in line or pushing their limit to rush.

*Waiting is what we must do.*

This is why we all must have perspective for each other so that we won't have conflicts whenever we are waiting in line or waiting for something exciting to happen. Waiting is a positive way to get what you want or what you need. Unless you have something to occupy yourself, you will have struggles with waiting, like video games or reading a book or checking your phone.

*Rushing makes conflict.*

A true story. I wanted a Nintendo switch for Christmas. My mom said that I would have to wait till a little while after Christmas. I felt upset because I really wanted to play my switch, so I convinced my dad to tell her to hurry up! My dad said that she couldn't come home right then because she was in a blizzard. I didn't understand because I didn't know what it was like to be in a blizzard.

*Waiting creates perspective.*

After a few days, my mom came home looking cold, exhausted, pale, and sick. When I saw how my mom looked, I felt harsh, selfish, and guilty. Once I walked over to my mom, she offered me my Nintendo switch. I denied it and decided to help her get better. I paid less attention to my game and learned why I must be patient.

*When we must wait,*

Whenever someone is excited for something to happen, it is time to wait. If you don't wait, it will never happen. Sometimes I have to wait for a visit from my parents, and like this week they had to cancel it and schedule it for another time. I felt depressed, but I can still get a visit, but I must wait.

*How long will it take?*

You ask this question because of the feeling that you really wanted it to happen in this very moment. But everything takes time. Everything in life is about time and waiting until it is the right time. The answer to this question will always depend on how patient you are.

*I can wait!*

I finally understand why I must wait. And I also understand what will happen if I don't wait. That is why I wrote this untold story, hoping it will help you if you have a hard time being patient.

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# Brighter Days

*written by D. H. at Farmington Bay Youth Center*

Here we go again. I'm back in secure, but this time it's different. I want to change. I want to better myself. I want to have a positive, happy life. I'm doing my time, but what's different about this time around, is when I get out, I'm going to rehab.

I have struggled with meth for a long time, but I'm ready for the help. I'm ready to be sober. It has taken me six years and the loss of the people I have loved, to realize this is not what I want for my life. I tend to protect people no matter the cost to myself.

Most recently, I was on parole, and I ran from my placement to go kick it with my "homegirl" and smoke. She sent a guy I never met to come get me. When he picked me up, we started to drive around. He was telling me that he had just got outta prison, and he had a baby on the way. At some point we stopped to get gas. When he went into pay for the gas, he handed me the pipe and an eight-ball, telling me there were cops across the street. When we left, the cops started following us and flashed us. I told him, "Let me hit the pookie (pipe) before you pull over."

When we stopped, I made up my mind that I would take the charges for all the drugs in the car. My thought process was he had more to lose. If I got locked up again, it ain't gonna be for as long as if he got locked up. So, I did take the blame.

I had to go to jail and come back to secure because I put him before myself even though I didn't know him. I finally learned my lesson. To be honest, I'm scared to change, but I want to be the one to change the cycle in my family. Not just so I can say that I did it, but also because I want to do it for myself and to show my brothers and sisters it's possible to change.

I'm done smoking dope, running away, and committing crimes. I'm not gonna lie. Change is hard and uncomfortable, but I'm committed. I'm starting to love myself. I know there might be some slipups when I'm out, but everyone messes up and that's okay. It's just how we deal with it. I have choices: I can run and hide, or I can blame others, or I could not care. But like I said it's different this time. In the past I never really thought about my future and what it was gonna look like, but now I have a picture in my mind about what I want. I just gotta remember: There's always brighter days after a storm. But most importantly, I deserve to put myself first.

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FINALIST

# 115 mph to Hell

*written by A. A. at Farmington Bay Youth Center*

This year I started to party and drink every weekend. I loved the feeling of not worrying about anything, smoking weed and drinking — my happiness. Till it ruined me.

I got a car when I turned 17. I fell in love with driving — to drive fast with the feeling of the window down and the breeze on my face. You don't think about anything, just the miles ahead.

That day started off like any other. My friends decided to throw a party. At first, I didn't have the motivation to go; it didn't feel right. But I didn't wanna leave my friends hanging so I got ready and ignored my gut feeling.

I picked up my best friend and her mans. He was my best friend in middle school, but we split in high school. I hadn't really seen him since I moved schools, so I caught up with him on the way to the party. When we got there, I talked to everyone. It was like a middle school reunion. My best friend from middle school was sitting all alone so I told him to take shots with me. It felt good to talk to him again.

Around midnight he and I laid around and talked about life. I was so faded that I don't remember what we talked about. All I could remember is I had told him, "Everything bad happens for a good reason."

At 2:00 a.m. when I decided to tap out, I was hella slumped. I went to lie down when my middle school best friend came in and told me they needed someone to get beer. I told them I was too faded. I couldn't drive. He kept askin' me, so I agreed.

On the way there, some friends told me to race them, so I did. I floored it. I remember my friend in the back seat sayin', "Go faster."

I was so faded I forgot there was a hill with a turn. As I turn to go down, I lost control. My car rolled down the hill. The windshield shattered on my face. When the car stopped, I checked on my homies. My front seat passenger and I had our seatbelts on. Then I looked to the backseat, and my friend wasn't in the car.

I hopped out of my broken window and walked to the other side of my car. There he was — lying on the ground unconscious, struggling to breathe. I cried to God for help. I didn't leave his side till the ambulance came, and I gave him a kiss on the cheek. I thought he was just in a coma, and everything was going to be okay. But five days later he was pronounced dead.

I will always hate myself. One mistake has ruined me — not just me but everyone who loved him. Now I'm locked up. His justice is turning my life around. I do this in his name.

FINALIST

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*Created at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center*

# Second Family

*written by M. M. at Slate Canyon Youth Center*

I was placed in foster care for my own safety. At least that is what I was told. The people said, "Your family is too dangerous and not safe for you to be around." I was only nine years old the day they came. It was a horrible day. "We are going to take you to get your arm fixed," they said.

This was true, but when I got to the hospital, they told me I was never going home again. I immediately started bawling. It made me so sad and scared. I didn't know what I was going to do without my family. After I was discharged from the hospital, they took me to a group home in Ogden called Christmas Box House. I was there for about a year and a half. During that time, there were many families visiting to see if they wanted to take me; too many of them were not interested. It made me feel like I wasn't special enough or even worth anyone's time.

I was able to see my family while I was there but not that much. I was always sad when they visited. I never thought that I was going to get taken away from my family. After all, I was still a little kid, and I didn't understand what was going on. Each time my family would leave, I just felt alone, and I couldn't change anything. My family always told me everything was going to be okay and that I was going to be home soon. I believed them until the day that I went to a foster home.

Fortunately, the foster family I went to finally made me feel like I was worth something. They didn't know me, and I didn't know them, but I felt like they cared, and for once, they made me believe I was actually worth something. After I had been with them for like a year and a half, my brother was also taken away from our family and came to live with me. I really felt like I was loved now that my brother was with me. He was always by my side, and we did everything together no matter what.

We were there for about six months together. Then we had court with our family, and they relinquished their rights to me and my brother. After that, we went to a family that wanted to adopt us. They were a nice family that took care of us and did a lot for us until me and my brother started making bad choices. When we got into gangs and started getting in trouble with the law, that family still never gave up on us. They have always been there for us no matter what. They are always telling us to do good and that they believe in us. They want us to keep trying to do better. They are our family, our second family.



# Before It's Too Late

*written by T. S. at Mill Creek Youth Center*

I was outside waiting for my homie to come swoop. I called him on my phone, "Where are you?"

"Around the corner," my boy answered.

Five minutes later, I saw a car approaching. I looked closer and didn't recognize it. The car pulled up next to me, and I realized it was my homeboy. I hopped in the whip with the cases of beer. Then, we pulled over and started drinking. We were posted in front of this other kid's house. When this kid came outside, we started chopping it up, saying, "It's been a long time."

In the car we were bumping the scanner just in case. Suddenly, I heard a voice yell, "Police!"

I thought someone was just playing around, but sure enough the red and blue lights turned on behind us. We started the car and began mobbin'. I saw someone in the street throw something out in front of us, but it was too late. The police hit us with spikes.

After the police hit us with the strips, we turned on a road and were drifting everywhere. I had thought we were going to smash out on the feds and lose the sirens, but no. I thought wrong. We were still drifting and losing control all over the road. We were on a road with a train track crossing. I knew the road we were on was a little rocky, but when we came across the railroad crossing, I told my homeboy, "Look out! Train tracks!"

Once again, it was too late. I thought we were gonna get away, but we flew into the bank of the train tracks and hit it head on. The car flipped about twice before stopping. I tried to get out but couldn't. I kicked the door open and tried to run, but it was too late. There were about ten cops surrounding us with their guns drawn. By this point I was soaked in beer from head to toe.

"Lemme see your hands," they yelled. I put my hands up, and I was caught. I wanted to make sure my boy was good, but he was already getting cuffed.

My family would always tell me, "You need to change."

I never listened. I don't want to be smashing away from the police and drifting into ditches. I don't want to be cuffed and covered in beer. I'm locked up now, and I'm just barely realizing I really don't want to be running from the police forever. I need to change, not just for my family, but also for me. I need to be out of trouble for my family. I have taken some major risks, and I don't want to die a disappointment to my family, to the world. I need to change before it's too late.

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EDITOR'S CHOICE

# Listen to Your Mother

*written by E. M. at Decker Lake Youth Center*

It was a dark and stormy night. I got snaked. Getting snaked means that someone you love switches up on you, when your homie sells you out, and you end up bloodied and beaten. Some people might call that twofaced or backstabbing. The moment it happened; everything went black.

Here is how it all started. I woke up in the hospital with my mom and sisters standing by my bedside, crying. They were wondering what had happened to me. I couldn't talk, and I was very afraid. I didn't want to hurt them more.

Before all of this happened, I remember being in my bedroom. My friend texted me: "Come visit me at my crib. I want to have a little kickback to celebrate my first day out of the box."

I told my mom, "I'm leaving."

She said, "Don't leave the house."

That got me to thinking. She doesn't normally tell me not to leave the house. I know my mother was not born yesterday. She knows how I am living and does not like any of my big homies. She knows when something is up with me. I left anyway. I took the keys to the Dodge and headed to my homie's crib. But first I hit the corner shop to grab some "stuff."

When I arrived at the kickback, I saw many faces that I wasn't cool with. I just played along though to keep things cool. Twenty minutes later, I went outside to grab some "stuff" from my whip. Suddenly, I saw those same faces approaching me. They were with my homie. At this time, I knew what was up. I was about to get jumped because my homies thought I was doing good in the community more than in the gang. And some jealousy. I did what I wanted more than what they wanted. They roughed me up badly. I was fighting for my life.

During the scuffle, they took everything, including my phone, money, and drugs, but not my car keys. I woke up bloodied and beaten next to my car. At this moment, the only thing going through my head was my mother's words: "Don't leave the house."

Then I passed out again. I don't know how I got to the hospital, but sometimes I feel like an angel carried me there. Who helped me? I will never know. Anyway, I just woke up there with my mother crying.

Now I know I should have listened to my mom. She knew how I was living, and she didn't approve. I am her son, so she wanted to protect me. I didn't listen because I thought she was wrong, but she's always right at the end of the day. When it comes to moms, you have to listen, obey, keep them happy, and move on.

EDITOR'S CHOICE

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*Created at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center*

# Drinking Till the Pain Goes Away

*written by C. M. C. at Decker Lake Youth Center*

When I was five years old, I watched my dad get deported back to Mexico. I was angry and depressed when he left. I was mad and sad when my mom drank in front of me. I would try to take care of her even though I was nine years old. When you look into my eyes, you will see the anger flare. When you look deep into my soul, you will see a coldhearted kid.

As I grew older, probably about thirteen, I still carried the pain that got me involved in a gang. I was doing beer runs for the gang and because I liked getting drunk. I even asked my mom's boyfriend to buy some bottles, so I could drink up with the homies. There are only a few times I got drunk with my mom. She cried in front of me about my dad. She expressed her emotions to me, but I never did the same to her. When I drank with the homies, they didn't know that I was full of depression and anger.

I kept on drinking and drinking until the pain went away. My momma did the same. After drinking, I still would feel the pain, so I would smoke some dank bud. I got drunk a lot with my older brothers. We all felt the same. We all felt depression and anger, but somehow, I felt more of the pain. I could feel the pain in my heart. When I heard about my brothers getting hurt in fights, I got mad, so I kept on drinking. It was like putting these words in my cup: "Make me numb. If not numb, I will drink until I black out."

I am not telling you about my lifestyle. I do not talk about my past life because it is too painful. But I'm telling you that I want to drink until the pain goes away. There is stuff that I have seen and been through that I don't talk about to my homies or any other people. I keep on drinking, and the pain is still there. I pray for it to stop, and maybe the Lord will forgive me of my sins for all the things I have done in my life.

Now I am sixteen, and I am sober because I am locked up. Since I have been locked up, I have graduated from substance abuse treatment group. I have learned that my triggers for drinking are commercials or conversations about alcohol or the actual presence of alcohol. When I get out, I have to avoid my triggers by using my coping skills. I think when I get out, I can make this work. I know I have to cope with my pain by just moving on with my life and not drinking. I think I can do this. I know I must, or I will be locked up again.



# Forgive, Can't Forget

written by Z. B. at Mill Creek Youth Center

It all started when I was a young kid, wondering where my so-called father was. Playing all my favorite sports, I wondered every game: *Is he going to show up?*

My grandparents and mom were always telling me: *Your dad went away for a little bit. He'll be back soon.*

I was always wondering where he went. Maybe he went to get me a birthday present. Maybe he's working? I was always pondering about where he could be. When my ninth birthday came around, I heard the truth from my mom and grandma: My dad was in prison. I thought to myself: *Why would he be in prison? Is he a bad person? What happened?* So many unanswered questions.

When I was eleven years old, he got out. I had so many questions for him when he came home. As he walked through the door, I had a great big smile on my face. I was glad my dad was home. I could finally tell all my friends: *My dad is back.*

All these questions I had for him, like: *What happened? Are you ever going to leave again?* He looked me in the eyes and said, "Son, I promise I'm never going to leave again." On that day I thought I would have him forever.

I woke up the next morning, thinking, *Today is going to be the best day of my life. I get to spend the whole day with my dad.* I ran out to the front room, asking my grandma, "Where is Dad?"

She said, "He said he will be back soon."

So, I sat there on the couch for hours waiting, wondering when he was going to show up. With every car I heard outside, I felt happy. I thought it was Dad. But then really it was just another car driving by, and I would feel anxious and sad. He never came back that day.

A week later my grandma told me he went back to prison. That day I had this feeling inside like half of me just went away. So, by the time I was eleven, I went looking for love in all the wrong places, with girls and gangs, trying to figure out what would make this feeling go away. I found myself stealing and robbing. And maybe, I thought if I do the things my dad does, he'll like and notice me.

Today I am eighteen years old, still traumatized from my past. Still wondering why all those people treated me the way they did. I am still wondering why I went through those things, why I had to be the person to experience those horrible things. Some questions I have — Will they ever be answered?

I still ask myself: *If Dad had stayed, would I have made better choices? And what if I had forgiven my dad? If I forgive my dad, maybe I can overcome the fears I have today.*

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EDITOR'S CHOICE

## ABOUT OUR STORY READERS/EVALUATORS/JUDGES

**TRINA VALDEZ** is the Education Liaison for the Department of Human Services, Utah State Board of Education and the Juvenile Court. Dr. Trina Valdez, a native of Utah, educator and educational equity scholar, is working to improve educational outcomes for youth in state care. She is committed to improving the educational experience for all Utah youth and their families. Before joining the Department of Human Services, she spent five years, working as an educator, community center director and partnership coordinator in South Salt Lake. She assisted with several partnerships among the city, University of Utah and Granite School District. She also led the Historic Scott School Art & Community Learning Center. At the University of Utah, Dr. Valdez served as a program coordinator with GEAR UP, a program to assist underrepresented high school students gain access to higher education. Dr. Valdez earned her master's and doctorate degree in Educational Leadership and Policy from the University of Utah.

**KATHLEEN NICHOLS** is a retired teacher who taught English at Weber High School for twenty-three years. She earned a Master of Education from Weber State University. Kathy loves to travel. She visited her son Blake when he was in Kenya with the Peace Corps (a lifechanging experience) and she recently toured North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand with Blake. She is currently volunteering with Catholic Community Services, teaching English to Congolese refugees who have settled in Ogden. She has had season tickets for Pioneer Theater Company for twenty years, and her family never misses the Shakespeare Festival in Cedar City. She is the mother of four children, one grandchild and an eighteen-year-old cat.

**JACKIE CHAMBERLAIN** is currently the Juvenile Competency Attainment Program Administrator for Utah State Division of Juvenile Justice Services. Previously, she was the public information officer for Utah State Division of Juvenile Justice Services. She has also served as the Education Liaison at the Utah Department of Human Services. Prior to this, Jackie worked in the Virgin Islands as a photojournalist and for the newspaper the V.I. Source; was a lead reporter and editor, writing and editing classified reports for the Utah Counterdrug Program; served as Adjunct Faculty for the Utah National Guard and NSA, teaching English; taught ESL to refugees; taught and continues to teach adults literacy. Jackie received a BA in English with an emphasis in creative writing from the University of Utah and a M.Ed. in curriculum and instruction from Weber State University.

**LINDA LOWE** was born in Oklahoma and grew up in Salt Lake City. She attended Skyline High School and the University of Utah. She interrupted her college education for twenty years in order to raise her four children and then graduated from the University of Utah with a BA in English. She spends much time caring for her three wonderful grandchildren. Linda worked with at-risk youth for twenty-one years in both education and counseling at ARTEC, Decker Lake Youth Center and DJJS Transition Services. She is a grandmaster knitter and professional floral designer. An avid reader, she loves stories and storytelling for entertainment, but most for understanding and connecting with people. In 2020 she sewed hundreds of pandemic masks to give away.

**MARV LUDDINGTON'S** life has been made up of a series of serendipitous encounters where he has found himself begging the question, "How did I get here?" Twenty-four years ago, one of these encounters introduced him to Farmington Bay Youth Center where he was hired to teach English. While teaching, he earned a master's degree in education. Currently, half of his time is spent as an Education Transition and Career Advocate (ETCA) at Farmington Bay Youth Center and several residential treatment centers helping students as they transition out of these settings. The other half of his time is spent assisting Blake Daniels, the YIC director for Davis School District and principal of Renaissance Academy. Marv plays the guitar and piano by ear. He immerses himself in other activities including cycling, reading, laughing at dumb jokes, cooking for friends, and sharing his love of popcorn by popping it daily for teachers and staff at Farmington Bay Youth Center.

### UNTOLD STORIES UTAH CONTEST COORDINATOR & ANTHOLOGY EDITOR

**BONNIE SHAW, PhD**, taught in the Granite School District for 36 years, retiring in June of 2011. For 33 of those 36 years, she taught in the Granite YESS Program at Salt Lake County Detention Center, Decker Lake and Wasatch Youth Centers and Salt Lake Valley Detention Center. In the spring of 2013 Bonnie was hired by USOE/Granite School District to be the Utah YIC Creative Arts Coordinator, a position in which she teaches creative writing, advocates for the arts and initiates creative arts projects in Utah Youth in Care programs. She earned a BA in English from Utah State University, M.Ed. in special education and PhD in education, culture, and society both from the University of Utah. In 1998 she received a Granite Education Foundation Excel Outstanding Educator Award.







*"There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."*

MAYA ANGELOU