

UNTOLD STORIES UTAH 2021

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 2021

About Untold Stories Utah 2021

It is a minor miracle that *Untold Stories Utah 2021* exists at all. This is the seventh year that the Untold Stories Utah contest and anthology have been generously supported by the USBE to encourage and showcase the talents of students in Youth in Care classrooms. In the previous six anthologies I have written introductions that explained *why* we write. This year I am explaining *how* we wrote. The how's of the 2020-2021 writing season during the COVID pandemic are the amazing story behind the creation and collection of the stories and artwork in this anthology.

We all remember the trauma of readjusting our lives to the realities of living in the world of a dangerous, even life-threatening pandemic. The stories that were published in *Untold Stories Utah 2020* were actually written in the fall of 2019, and the anthology was being printed in March of 2020 just about when the pandemic hit. Utah Correctional Industries had no problem completing and delivering the anthology to the Utah State Board of Education, but then everything began to get complicated. Schools were closed, and everyone who worked at the USBE office building was working from home. How would we distribute the anthologies to our published student authors?

And how would I make this happen when I had just entered the first month of pandemic isolation, complete isolation because I am maybe the oldest working teacher in Utah, and, yes, I am the Utah YIC Creative Arts Coordinator and in charge of this project. Well, somehow we made it happen, especially with the assistance of Amanda Charlesworth, a superb and creative executive assistant from USBE. First problem solved.

As the pandemic numbers increased into the summer, my determination to survive by living in isolation became absolute. I thought perhaps I would have to finally stop teaching altogether. For the past seven years I had worked primarily as a teaching artist, focusing on creative writing projects, Untold Stories Utah being one of our main projects. Under these circumstances, how could I do my work and provide students throughout Utah the opportunity to tell their untold stories? The answer: Zoom.

During the summer of 2020 I taught myself how to teach on Zoom. Would this work? I did not know. I could not work directly with students in secure facilities, youth detention centers, residential treatment programs and YIC alternative school programs. And teachers with tech skills would have to be present in the programs before I could even test the possibility that I could zoom in and write with students. I gave the teachers a chance to get things going in their classrooms under the new COVID protocols, and then I tested to see if anyone was interested in this new experiment. I began in mid-October with the young women at Gemstone Residential and with my old friend and master teacher, Mark Marsing. That was the beginning.

Fortunately, all the programs I had worked with in person before the pandemic wanted the opportunity to have their students tell their untold stories on Zoom. I will spare you the details of how to write with students using Zoom screen share. Needless to say, it worked. A big thanks to all the YIC teachers who made that possible, including Mark Marsing, Gemstone Residential and DSI at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center; Andrea Carter, Renaissance Academy at Farmington Bay Youth Center; Sandy Hardy and Emily Juett, Granite YESS at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center; Joanna Timothy, Granite YESS at Granite Connections High School; Bob Loy, Renaissance Academy at Clearfield YHA; Tori Allen, Malan's Peak High at Mill Creek Youth Center; Anders Kvaal, Horizonte at Odyssey Adolescent; Lindsay Eberhardt, Canyons YIC at Canyons Youth Academy; Lorraine Simmons, Provo YIC at Slate Canyon Youth Center; and Deina Mitton, Manti Academy at Manti YHA.

By scheduling and rescheduling Zoom meetings from mid-October 2020 through mid-March 2021,

we – teachers, facility staff and I – managed to assist students in creating 115 personal narratives to send off to our stories evaluators. Our story readers /judges/ evaluators read and read and then decided which stories would be published in *Untold Stories Utah 2021*. After two weeks of kind and careful reading, the evaluators selected thirty-two personal narratives for publication and prizes.

Even in the middle of a once-in-a-century pandemic, the writing and storytelling continued, driven by the enthusiastic desire of YIC students to share their untold stories with the world. That is the power of telling your own truth – strong, maybe urgent – even in the middle of a pandemic.

Reader, enjoy these wonderful stories of surviving and thriving, learning and even laughing through life's ups and downs, stories from the lives of these brave, young storytellers.

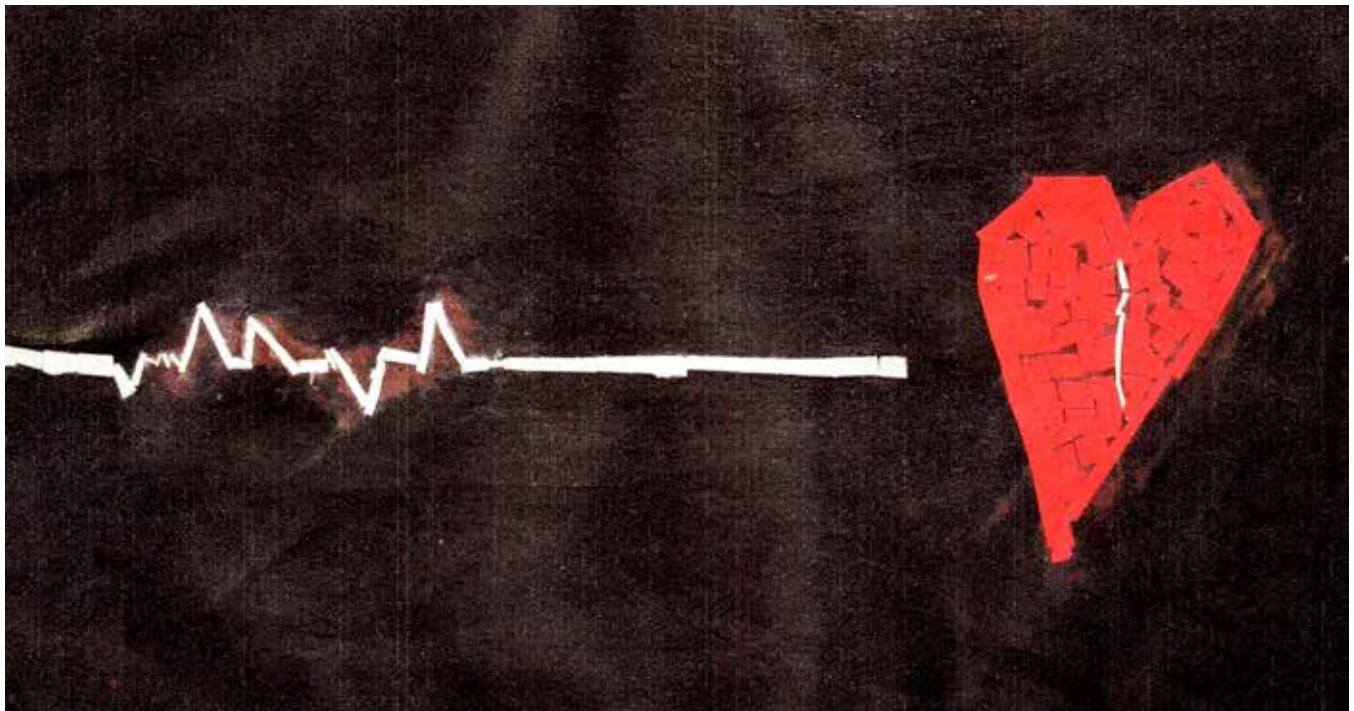
Bonnie Shaw, PhD, Utah YIC Creative Arts Coordinator

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

In addition the participating teachers listed above, we would also like to thank Cathleen Taggart, art teacher at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center; Emily Holmes, art teacher at Mill Creek Youth Center; Juliann Law, graphic designer; Nic Shellabarger, Julia Armstrong, Heidi Pitkin, YIC USBE, administrative support; Jason Rosvall, Granite YESS, administrative support; and Utah Correctional Industries, printing.

ON THE COVER:

The paper mosaic pencil on the cover of this anthology was created by a young man at Mill Creek Youth Center under the watchful eye of his art teacher, Emily Holmes. Bravo!!! What better symbol for the writing of untold stories than an old-style yellow pencil. I love those yellow pencils even though just like most of the students who wrote here, I write on my computer. But those pencils still matter as artwork, symbol, tools and fond memories of forming letters into words and words into stories to share and treasure. Long live the yellow pencil.



Created at Mill Creek Youth Center

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Hope

written by L. B. at Odyssey Adolescent

When I was fourteen, I went into treatment for the first time. I hated it. I didn't talk to many people, and when I did, connection was lacking. The words we spoke felt empty as if we were generating noise to fill the silence. I felt alone – until Ellie showed up.

Ellie immediately began talking endlessly to me. The bold colors of her personality shocked me. Even though she was the new girl, she was the first one to make me feel welcome. We ate lunch together every day at our own table. When it became just Ellie and me, I felt less alone. Silences that used to be filled with empty words were now filled with uncontrollable laughter, the kind that makes your eyes tear-up and stomach hurt. No matter how much pain she was in, you could always hear her laughter.

It didn't take too long for everyone else to fall in love with her too. Soon our lunch table, once reserved just for us, filled up with people who were drawn in by the light radiating from her soul. She cared deeply for those she loved and wouldn't hesitate to defend someone who needed it. She had a strangely powerful ability to make people love themselves. Maybe it was because she gave the love she lacked for herself to others.

Ellie wanted to go by her middle name, Hope, because she wanted to give people hope. Eventually she began to open up about her hidden pain, fear and self-hatred caused by physical and sexual abuse. Somehow, it never stopped her from loving people. She seemed to recognize her pain in others.

As Ellie opened up to me, I was angry that she had been hurt so deeply. She didn't like being hugged because of her PTSD. The first time I saw her outside of treatment, she hugged me. I was so happy she trusted me. We formulated future plans for helping others through our love for psychology. She wanted to start a YouTube channel to advocate for mental health. She was the only person who could make me feel confident enough to put myself out there like that.

Ellie's pain followed her. We both ended up back in day treatment again, so my mom wouldn't let me see her. It felt like something in my life was missing without her. She still supported me, calling a couple times a month to check on me. Once she came to my open window in the middle of the night and told me to kiss her on the cheek before she left. That was the last time I saw her.

The next time I was sitting in therapy, my therapist whispered, "We need to talk about Ellie." All these memories flashed through my mind. She continued, "There's no easy way to say this. Ellie killed herself."

The grief comes and goes in waves, but no matter how much it hurts, the hope she gave me can never die.



Fate Is a Hunter

written by T. M. at Manti Youth Academy

Fate is a hunter. I am its victim.

I was nine when my older brother invited me into his bedroom. He was fifteen. It hurt me. I was confused. I pulled the blanket over my head. He invited me into his room many times, day and night. I went back to my room, confused. I pulled the blanket over my head again and again.

Fate is a hunter. I am the captured.

I was twelve when my uncle K.W. died in a devastating car crash, January 23, 2014. I was depressed. I had a knife. I held on my arm. I felt the coolness of the blade against my arm. I thought of cutting myself. Cutting myself would relieve the pain. Eventually I did. I have dozens of scars on my left arm.

Fate is a hunter. I am its target.

I was suicidal at the age of fifteen. I had bottled up my emotions. I was in pain. My stepfather had a not-so-secret gun hidden in his bedroll. It was loaded. I was stupid. I put the barrel of the gun to my head. I did not pull the trigger. I changed my mind.

Fate is a hunter. I am its hostage.

I had a girlfriend who gave me a phone. I wasn't supposed to have it. I was on probation. I was stupid. I turned it on. I wanted to cheat on her. I did not follow the rules.

Fate is a hunter. I am the hidden.

I was diagnosed with depression at the age of fifteen. I was prescribed pills. I had a phone, and I was cheating. The stress was real. I opened the bottle. I popped the pills to get high.

Fate is a hunter. I am its prey.

I was caught with the phone. My older brother turned me in to my P.O. My probation was reset. I was sent to treatment. I overdosed on my prescriptions. I was slipping into unconsciousness. I was fifteen. I was almost gone.

Fate is a hunter. I am its rival.

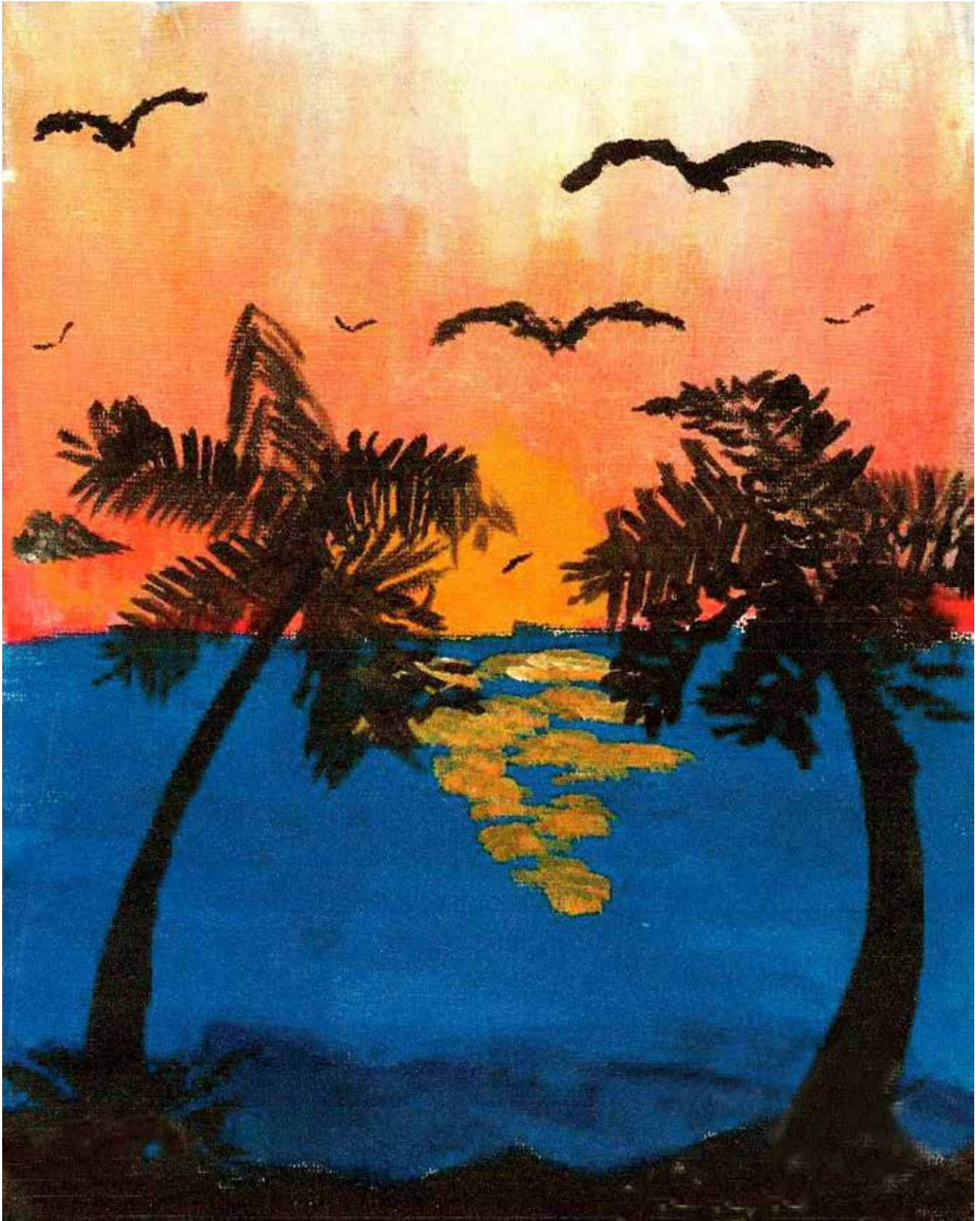
The ordeal of the situation was resolved when I went to treatment. I received help. I wanted the help. I wanted to change. I'm seventeen now. I'm still living. I learned to fight back. I learned to change my fate.

Fate is a hunter. I was the hunted.

I was the victim, the captured, the hostage, the hidden, the prey and the hunted. Now I am the rival, no longer hunted. Now I am still in a battle with my fate, but I am winning.

Fate is a hunter. I am the winner.





Created at Slate Canyon Youth Center

My Name

written by C. R. at Odyssey Adolescent

My second name formed a big part of my identity. Over the seventeen years of my life I have had three names. My birth mother gave me my first name. My third name I gave to myself. My aunt, my Mum, gave me my second name. Each of my names holds experiences and memories that define a part of my life. When the name changed, my life changed.

I had been awake for five minutes, already in a rush because I had woken up late. Mum had been on me about school so being tardy was alarming. I needed a shirt, pants, shoes, my backpack and earbuds. Getting out of bed was the first step. Rolling over after I had shut off my phone, I got what I needed and then heard my Mum scream, "Hurry up. You don't want to be late again."

Because I was busy on my phone, maybe ten minutes had gone past since Mum's warning. Suddenly I realized everything was quiet. I felt a cold chill down my spine. I jumped up, packed my stuff, skipped down the hall, turned around the corner and saw my Mum sitting on the red couch. I asked, "Is my laundry done?"

I remember thinking, "What is she staring at?" Her eyes seemed fixated on something important. Then I noticed she wasn't breathing. I grabbed her arm, shaking her with terror. I screamed, "MOM, ARE YOU OKAY?" Twelve-year-old me ran out of the living room and leaped out of my front door. I banged on my friend's front door till his mom answered in a panic, yelling, "Why are you banging on the door like the police?"

I cried, "Something is wrong with my mom."

We both ran over to my house. My neighbor was on her phone calling 9-1-1. The first step back in my house immediately felt like foreign territory, almost like I had never stepped foot in there before.

The emergency responders on the phone were walking us through the procedures. As instructed, we pulled her off the couch, flat onto her back with a pillow beneath her head on the ground and then pounded on her chest three at a time then paused and did it again. Honestly, after that, I can't remember much except seeing my Mum being dragged out on the stretcher. I never saw her again. She left taking with her my second name, the name she called me for ten years, the name of the horrible son who had given her so much pain and abuse.

I woke up the next day wishing it was all a bad dream, wishing I could hear her screaming at the top of her lungs my name one more time. Your Mum is your first love; she had been mine. I never told her. Little did I know, the years to come would be a bad dream, my identity never the same. I had to change my name.



Pieces, Finally Peace

written by N. S. at Decker Lake Youth Center

Some days I fought with my dad; some days I didn't come home for days, even weeks. Even when I wasn't home, I was fighting – people, even myself. I was one person fighting three wars in one town, my emotions splitting from my body, splitting into other vibes of moments of my life, my body becoming the puppet of my emotions.

For the past year I have thought back on my life as pieces. Now I am eighteen, but I remember pieces back when I was eleven. The pieces float over time. I remember feeling many things.

I felt excited, ecstatic, and crazy when I was with her. I felt mellow but not real with other people. I felt angry and put down when I was with my dad. I felt an abyss, nothingness, and every time I was alone, I only felt and saw a world I was probably never meant to be in.

When I walked past her house, I felt a piece of me. When I walked past other friends' houses – other pieces. When I walked past my house, my dad's house – guess what? Another piece of me.

When I walked these streets of memory, I did not know how to make myself whole, how to react or how to take my emotions with me, so I don't always have to feel certain emotions in certain places I went. I tried to walk my happiness when I was angry, tried to use my anger when I knew I was being used. You people know what I'm getting at, right? Or at least my viewpoint?

I have always heard of people being able to feel a real self, a whole self, just by listening to music; for me though, music just kept me sane enough not to lose myself to craziness. If I got interrupted, I would always find a way to get away so I could go back into my own delusion – all by myself – that was what felt right.

Over time over time I encountered a stranger who didn't even know me, but somehow ended up knowing me just by looking at me. He told me that I was suffering and broken, looked straight through my life and told me about myself. He opened my eyes, showed me a path, a path that taught me self-healing, forgiveness, taught me to become more aware of myself, of others and my surroundings. He influenced me just by looking at me. I was able to develop a self-control system and was able to put my pieces together with control. I know I don't have to be alone just to feel "right." Now my life isn't just pieces and emptiness, but one big picture. I am whole. I found my truth. I am one with my own God now. I went from feeling so many pieces to feeling peace.





Created at Mill Creek Youth Center

It's Supposed To Be Baby and Me

written by V. W. at Farmington Bay Youth Center

It is my baby, my baby girl, and I had to give her up.

When I was twelve, I started using drugs with my best friend from second grade. We started smoking weed. It wasn't until I was fourteen that I moved on to using meth, Xanax, ecstasy and whatever I could find. Along with using drugs, I was getting into lots of trouble, but it was not until I was seventeen that I got pregnant. I found out when I was locked up in secure.

When I got out, I had my baby girl. I was clean for a while and took care of my baby, but then I started using again. I gave my baby to my mom before I ran away from my placement and parole agreement. I ran away and started using hard drugs, but I went back to see my baby every night, so I got caught. When I was sent back to secure, it was then I decided to put my baby up for adoption.

It has been two months since the adoption was finalized. It is my baby, but I had to give her up. I feel like I failed her, but I can't stop the meth. It weighs me down. I feel like I can't control my addiction, and it takes the best parts of life away from me. My addiction took my daughter away from me. Do you know how it feels to lose the only person you have in life because you're such a screw up? Because you can't seem to get your life straight? Well, I do. That's one thing that I will never forgive myself for!

When I gave my baby up for adoption, I was done. I didn't care anymore about what I did or what went on in my life. The only reason that I'm even sitting here right now is because of my daughter. Yes, people say, "Well, you gave her a better life. You gave someone a gift." That is no comfort to me.

That was supposed to be my life, my gift and my baby. She's supposed to be my world. I'm supposed to be the shoulder she cries on. I'm supposed to be there when she has her first breakup, not with them, with me. I'm supposed to be at her wedding. That's what they don't understand. It was supposed to be me, me and my daughter.

When I think of the future, I think of the past. I do what I know best. I sit with this pipe and inhale, crystalizing my lungs so I don't feel. I'm done here. I don't know where to go. I don't know if I have any more, any more fight left in me. Nobody knows my real pain, how I hate myself, how when I look in the mirror, I see nothing but a horrible person. I take this pipe and inhale, just hoping one day this will end.



Motivational Scars

written by R. M. at Mill Creek Youth Center

I'm gonna tell you about the day that changed my life forever. On a cold night when I was eight years old, I was at my grandma's house. It was kind of cold inside too. I decided to light a fire in the wood-burning stove. Little did I know that starting that fire would end in something so bad.

Anyway I got the wood in the firebox, put in some newspaper and, not knowing what would happen, put some lighter fluid in as well. Then I used a cigarette lighter to light the fire. As I lit the fire, I slipped and the long sleeve of my polyester shirt caught on fire.

I was so scared that I ran to the kitchen sink and tried to put it out. I didn't work. Next I ran to the bathroom shower. By this time I was having to look towards the ceiling to breathe so I wasn't breathing in flames. I got into the shower, turned on the water and put out the fire. Then I hopped out, took off my burned shirt and ran down to the basement pantry to hide. I was scared my grandma would be mad.

In the next minute my grandma was yelling for me to come upstairs. I was so scared that I ran to my dad's girlfriend's room in the basement. When she saw me, she started to cry. But she kept her head, took me upstairs, got me into new pants and put a blanket around me. My grandma then drove me to the hospital. I was burned from my waist to my neck, but I was not in pain because the fire had burned my nerve endings.

When I got to the hospital, they gave me a shot that put me to sleep. I didn't wake up until one month later. When I came to, I was confused. I did not know where I was. I soon learned that I had a lot of physical therapy to do. Believe it or not, I had to relearn how to walk. All in all, I was in the hospital for four months, and in that time I went through the worst pain in my life.

Once I left, I still had to do therapy, but I was mostly healed. The doctors said I probably would have to come back for more surgery later in life. Now I am seventeen, and so far I haven't had to go back.

A couple of months after I got out of the hospital, I decided not to let my burns hold me back. When people joke around about my scars, I laugh to show with them I don't care what they think because I have made it through the pain. The thing I have learned is: Don't let stupid things like scars make you give up on life. Let your scars motivate you to do better. Show people your scars made you strong and didn't break you.





Created at Mill Creek Youth Center

Fighting in a Cold World

written by D. T. at Mill Creek Youth Center

Watching friends and cousins from my neighborhood fight for respect was no different from watching dogs fight to be alpha male. Growing up I always had it easy and kinda took a liking to it. Until we moved to Utah when I was ten, I never thought I'd have to be the way I am today. But good things don't last forever, and I learned that the hard way.

First day I arrived in Utah we went to my aunt's house and got acquainted with the rest of the family that I had never met before. My aunt told me to go meet my older cousin and then go to the grocery store. On our way to the store we stopped at a house, and my cousin got out and started talking to these older dudes. After that, that's when things started to get crazy. My cousin told me to get out of the car and walk with him to the back of the house.

Once we got to the back yard, my cousin told me, "Take off your jacket and get ready to fight."

I asked him, "What for?"

Just then someone rushed up behind me and started throwing punches at the back of my head. I dazed out a little and then turned around to face my opponent. It was a kid my age, but he had a fire in his eyes that I'd never seen before. I threw my first punch and connected with his jaw sending him stumbling back. I never gave him another chance to swing back. My last punch landed on his temple, causing him to black out and fall on the ground. When I turned to look at my cousin, he was clapping his hands and telling everyone, "That's how we roll."

I looked back at the kid and felt bad for him so I helped him on his feet and dusted off his shoulders. Then my cousin and I left for the grocery store. On our way I asked him, "Why did you make me fight that kid?"

He just looked at me and said, "That's how we welcome kids to the neighborhood."

All I could think was how it reminded me of when my uncle would feed his pitbulls, and they'd start fighting to the death over a piece of meat. It reminded me of wild animals. Then again it made me feel like I earned something, but I couldn't figure out what it was. Looking in the rearview mirror, I could see my eyebrow was split, and my lip and nose were bleeding.

The day of that fight opened up my eyes, and I realized that the world is not always a good place. But I also learned that I could fend for myself in this cold world. Now I am eighteen. I have had lots of fights. I won most of them. It was a good day when I learned I could fight and win.



Mother Struggle

written by D. L. at Decker Lake Youth Center

My mother and father brought me, and my nine-year-old brother and six-year-old sister to America from Mexico when I was three years old. Crossing the border with three children, with little water and walking hundreds of miles just to get over the border safely without getting caught was a really tough experience.

After we arrived the U.S., my father was still angry and abusive. I still remember as a kid when my dad would lock us kids up in a room and beat my mom over the stupidest and pettiest things. For a couple of years my mother suffered from his abuse. Luckily, he got what was coming to him and was sent to prison for domestic violence when he attempted to kill my mother.

After he did seven years, he was deported. I will never be able to know the guy because he was murdered in Mexico for all the bad stuff he had done. I only know about 10% about the things he did. Even my mom chooses not to tell me because she doesn't want to relive it by telling her stories.

But my mother's persistence in getting us to America and trying to give her kids opportunities she never had is something only a mother would do for her children. My mother has saved our family from the violence of the cartels. Having my mother come to America has provided a better opportunity for herself and her kids. My mother worked really hard to provide for her children so we always had decent clothes and shoes and great food to eat. Never hungry.

In spite of my mother's struggle, I have made mistakes and increased her struggles by blowing it and being in and out the system. This is horrible feeling. The reality is it is hard knowing a life any different from what I have been through because growing up in the household I grew up impacted my character and view of the world. My mom's been through enough struggle, from domestic violence to having to sell drugs to put food on our table because my dad would be too busy getting high and beating my mom over his tortillas getting cold too fast.

Even though I'm posted in Decker Lake, God has given me this chance of redirecting myself to realize what I've got at hand and what I am missing out on. This is my turning point to do better and get somewhere in life. Now I have great opportunities like finishing high school and pursuing further education. I will take advantage of these opportunities because my mom did not go through all that struggle just to see me not pursue my education and end up locked up in prison.

My mother's struggle was immense. A mother's struggle is immense. We under appreciate our mothers. It is now my turn to give back to my life-giver and support. My Momma deserves an end to the struggles. And my love.





Created at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center

My Reality

written by R. H. at Canyons Youth Academy

Growing up, my parents were not around. My dad was never there, and, well, my mom was only good for creating little added trauma drops. However, my grandmas, Grandma and Nana, or at least that's what I would call them, were there for me until they weren't.

From ages zero to seven, I lived with a dog and my grandmas. But because I rolled the dice wrong, I couldn't live with them all anymore, so my nana, my dog and I moved about four blocks away. I really miss that time.

When I was about eight, my mom, who I hadn't seen since I was three, came back to try and build a relationship with me. I started to form an attachment with my mom. Then my mom decided she didn't value me nearly as much as she did drugs. She escaped from the house at midnight without telling us and never came back.

Then, when I was eleven, my dog, who was there my whole life, started to get really sick and soon couldn't walk. He was in pain; we had to do something and we did.

When I was fifteen, I got a ukulele from my grandma, and I played it every day. The first song I learned was "Can't Help Falling in Love," which happened to be my grandma's favorite song. I would play it for her as much as I possibly could. The week leading up to March 1st it was very evident that my grandma, who was 82, was declining. Every day that week I would play her favorite song.

Every day I was there, singing and playing to her so she would know she was not alone. I was there for her just like she was for me my whole life. The day before March 1st, I didn't know if she could even hear me, but I was still there, playing and singing. On March 1st I couldn't play to her anymore. At that point my Nana left with me.

A year later everything seemed to start to get better. I was starting to accept that my grandma was gone. But it didn't stay that way for long. It couldn't. I was starting to feel happy, and of course that wasn't allowed. Very suddenly, on a day that felt like any other, my Nana had to go to the hospital. I did what I always do in these situations: Get my ukulele and play to her. I went to the hospital. I talked to her on the phone.

I tried my hardest to be there for her. But I missed one call, the last chance I had to talk to her. I missed it. Some of these losses I have coped with, some not. I wish I could commission Shakespeare to write a happy ending. I can't. This isn't some fairytale. This is my reality, foster care, but no real family. Now I have to start over again.



Driving with Two Feet

written by N. N. at Canyons Youth Academy

One day my sister Mufasa decided to drive Dad's car with her crooked self. I thought it was a wonderful idea so I hopped in the whip. After a drive, when we were on our way back to the crib, and she started talking smack, saying, "I can reverse park, and you can't. I'm all professional."

My dumb-self said, "Okay, let's see. I wanna see if you really 'BDA'."

And she's like, "All right."

Then she reversed, put her foot on the gas and straight drove into the garage, like zoom, crashing it. At this point we're both screaming at the top of our lungs like that was gonna do something.

I put my arms up like that was gonna stop the car from hitting the garage. I was yelling, "STEP ON THE BRAKE, YOU IDIOT?"

She shouts, "WHICH ONE?"

At this point I was thinking we're about to drive through the garage and straight through the complex before she figured out which pedal was the brake. She finally figured it out.

Then here came my older sister Hei. I started laughing and calling, "Musafa, an idiot."

I hopped out the car, and Hei started going all mom-mode, yelling loud enough to wake up the whole block, "Get out!"

Musafa opened the door to hop out, and the car started moving again. SHE DIDN'T PUT IT IN

PARK! So then she put it in park and hopped out.

Hei slapped her and hopped in to park the car. I was cracking up, telling her, "You're all talk."

Hei parked the car, and

we went upstairs. Hei walked, saying, "Mom, Dad, Mufasa crashed the car."

Dad asked, "Is it bad?"

Sounding crazy mad, Hei said, "Yea."

Dad said, "Drop them off right now."

Hei was mad, doing all that salty talk. We took some pics of the car and garage and hopped into the car for school. The whole ride Hei was yelling, going off and just doing way too much. We got to the school, and Hei said, "That's the last time I'm dropping y'all off anywhere. I'm done."

I hopped out, like, "What did I do?"

Laughing, I was making her mad. I hadn't even shut the car door when she drove off. Musafa and I looked at each other and started laughing.

Later on that day we went home, and the garage door was fixed. We walked in the house and asked my dad, "Did you pay for it?"

Dad was like, "Duhh, why wouldn't I have to pay for it?"

Musafa asked, "How did they know it was us?"

Hei said, "Us?? That was you."

Dad said, "They didn't know. I told em."

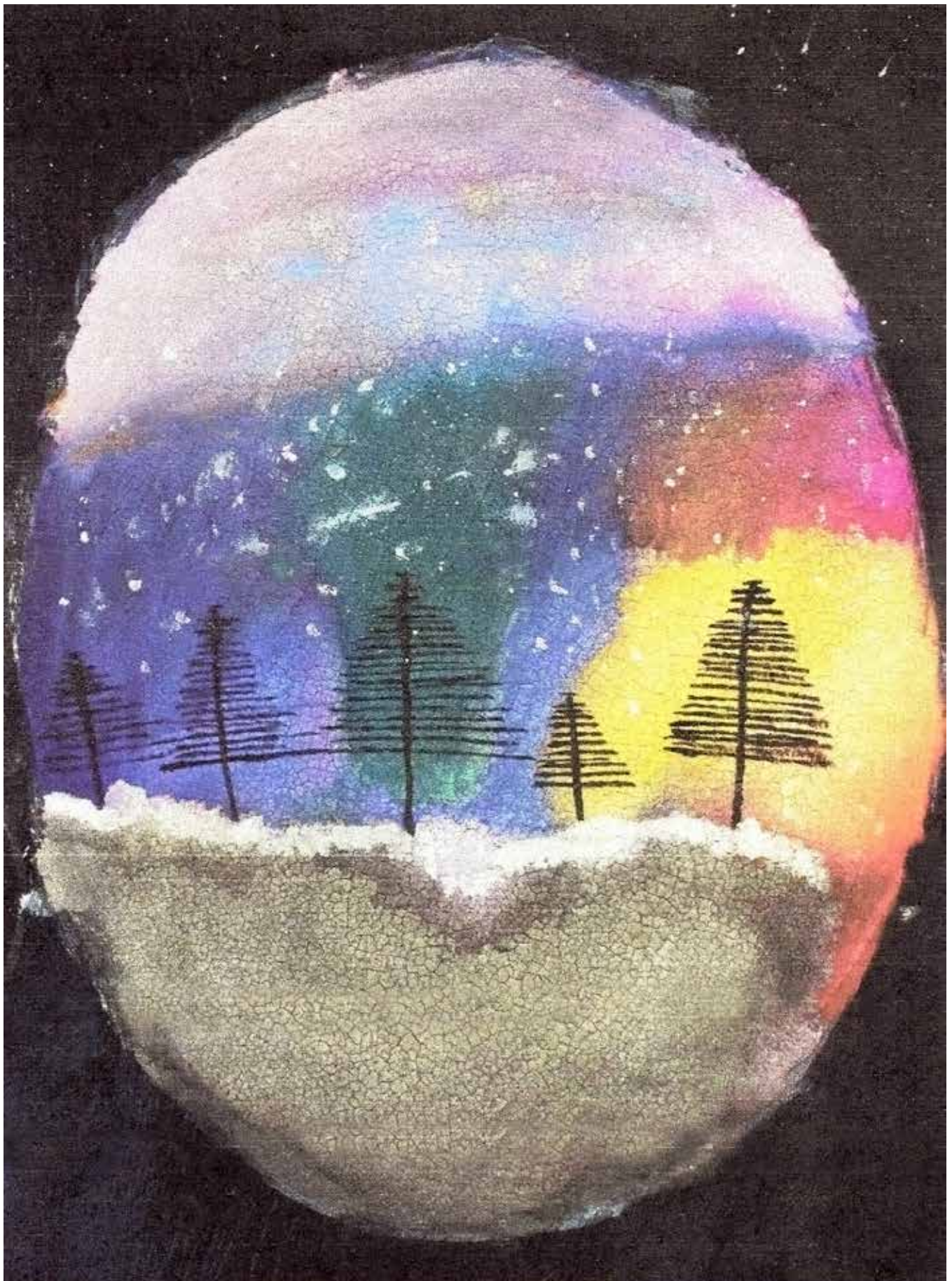
I asked, "How much was it?"

Dad said, "\$700."

I looked at Musafa and was like, "We could've bought so much with \$700, but, no-o, you wanna be dumb and crash."

Later on we found out that she was driving with both feet. PSA: DON'T DRIVE WITH TWO FEET.





I Survived

written by C. M. at Manti Youth Academy

It was late September, in fact it was September 29, 2018, a day I will never forget. It was six days after my sixteenth birthday. I woke up at noon on a school day. The week before this infamous day was absolutely terrible.

On my birthday my stepfather told me, *"You're just a little lying scumbag."*

On the one day of the year that was mine, my mother said, *"You don't deserve this."* She was referring to the gift my grandfather had given me, a brand-new Stetson.

They were both drunk again.

Then my stepfather said in front of my friends, *"Come here, punk."* Then he backhanded me.

Remembering all of this, six days later, I woke up also remembering having been bullied on the bus home from school the day before, after I had received a two-week suspension for some rumors and accusations that were spread about me in school. The kids I thought were my friends broke my trust. They lied and said that I threatened to shoot up the school. I didn't say that. I think they lied because I was the new kid and the outcast.

After all of that, I never cried, not even on the day it happened. Then I did. I did when I loaded my gun. I cried when I said goodbye to my dog. She was a good dog, the nicest black lab I'd ever met. She thought she was a lap dog. I hugged her goodbye.

BANG! went the gun into the side of my head.

I woke up in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. I still don't remember much, other than the extreme headache I had for weeks, the constant struggle with depression still there, and the lack of family to care for me. I do remember a few hours when my favorite bus driver was there sitting by my bed, crying. I remember my mom never coming. The last time I saw her was the day before my "incident," as the hospital staff called it when they were around me.

I still don't remember all of what happened. I'm sure there's more to be told. It was a faulty reload that saved me; the bullet hit my temple with just enough force to knock me out, but nothing more. I got lucky. The more I think about it, the more I know someone was watching over me because I survived.

After the incident, I never saw my parents again. When I was released from the hospital, I recovered at my bus driver's home for about five months. Then I went into State's custody. I now realize that my suicide attempt was a cry for help. And, now when I need help, I realize there are better ways. Looking back now, I remember that pain, but I also remember a distinct and loving embrace, ethereal yet very real. I thank whoever saved me and that I survived.



Dark World

written by T. H. at Slate Canyon Youth Center

I open my eyes and there's no sunshine coming through my blinds. It's oddly cold. I slowly roll out of bed, drag myself into the shower and turn the heat all the way up. I'm brushing my teeth when I hear my phone vibrating.

Wanna hang out when I'm off work?

Yeah, come over.

I go through my day lazily, just watching Netflix in the theatre room. Then I realize it's almost three o'clock so I get up, walk downstairs, and pull on a hoodie and some sweats. My phone buzzes.

On my way.

I slowly put my phone back in my pocket. Something inside just doesn't feel right, and my heart is racing for no specific reason. I get up from the couch a few minutes later and head upstairs to unlock the door. I'm walking upstairs when I hear bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, one after another right outside of my house. I run straight to the door and throw it open. My eyes narrow in, and I see my closest friend lying on the asphalt, face down in a pool of his own blood.

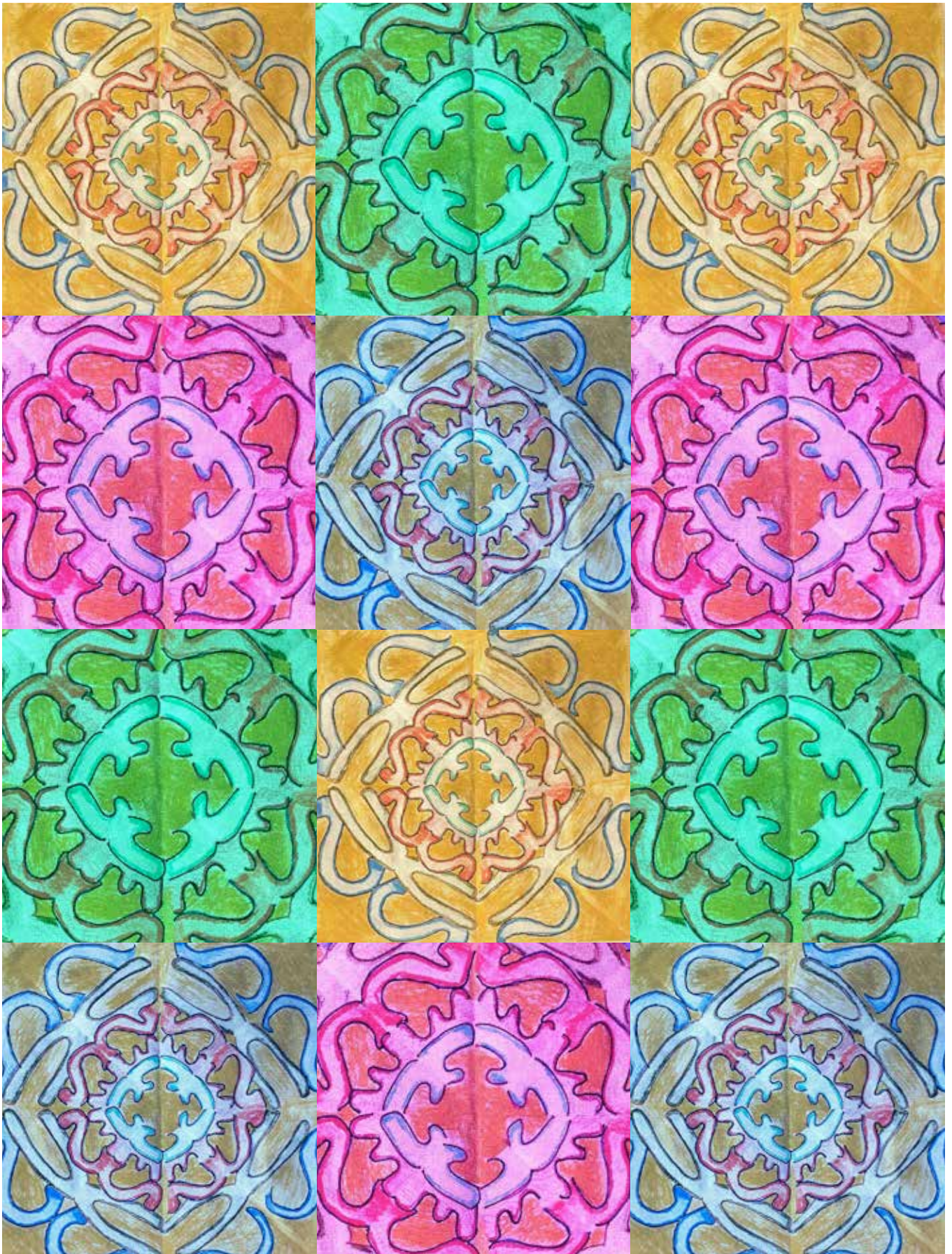
A police officer is standing above him with his gun drawn. I barely see the second officer standing about five feet away or the other officers arriving on the scene. Out of the corner of my eye I notice the smoking, mangled dirt bike lying on the lawn ten feet away.

By this time, tears are streaming down my face, and the world becomes a blur. All I hear are muffled sirens in the background and my own screams. I can barely hold myself up as I'm trying to get to my friend while fighting off two officers as they are dragging me back into my house.

Everything is a daze, and now I'm in my car racing to the hospital, fueled with anger and anxiety. I break just about every traffic law there is. I arrive at the hospital, skid to a stop and rush into the building. Glaring lights in the lobby are making my head pound harder and harder as time passes. Twenty-eight hours of waiting feels like decades, and then I finally see the doctor. "He didn't make it," he says softly. My whole world goes dark.

I still don't know what happened that day, why guns were drawn, why my friend had to die. All the police would say was that he was a "suspected burglar." Before that day, I believed I could trust the police with my life. I had been taught the police were there to help and protect us, and I had seen them do things to better communities. Even in my own interactions with the police, I knew I had messed up and they were just doing their job; I was never worried about them hurting me. I felt safe when the police were around. Now, I'm afraid they're going to be the ones that take my life away.

FINALIST



Created at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center

I Killed My Father

written by C. B. at Mill Creek Youth Center

"Go to your room," my father shouted.

"Screw you!" I shouted back.

"I said go to your room!"

It was twenty-one days before my tenth birthday, just twenty-three days till Christmas. Everyone was supposed to be happy. But for my family, this year, just like the last three, all was gloom and misery.

My father had been in-and-out of the hospital for the past three years. Money was running low because of all the hospital bills, or at least that's what my parents always fought about. And to make it worse, the doctors didn't have any way to help other than give him pain meds and new surgeries. He had something wrong with his stomach. The doctors weren't quite sure what was even wrong. All they knew was he would probably die because his stomach was eating itself. At nine years old, I was too little to understand the pain he was going through.

As I was walking to my room to grab my clothes for a shower, my mom stopped me and told me something that would change me forever.

"Don't stress your dad out. It could make him sicker."

"Fine. I'll apologize," I told her

I kept going and got my clothes. Little did I know I would never be able to apologize. I walked out into the hall to see my mom standing inside her bedroom by her barely cracked bedroom door.

"Honey?" she said in a whisper, trying to get Dad's attention. "Honey?" she said a little louder. She turned on the lights. "Honey!"

She screamed and rushed for Dad, grabbing her phone and dialing 9-1-1. Then she flipped him on the ground and onto his side. I could see that he wasn't waking up. It felt like forever before we heard the sirens.

I shot up and ran out the front door, waving my arms like a mad man to get their attention. They saw me and drove right up to the house. The EMTs hopped out and moved forward like soldiers running to battle right past me except for one officer. He sat right next to me. I just cried.

After what felt like hours of pain and worry, the EMTs came into the living room. They said to my mother, older brother and me, "We weren't able to bring him back."

Those words hit me like a speeding semi. Then a stretcher passed by with a black body bag. That was my father, the one who raised me, the one who taught me how to live.

My father died on December 2nd. My tenth birthday was on December 23rd, my worst birthday ever. My mother's words from that day will stick with me forever: "*Don't stress your dad out. It could make him sicker.*" For years I thought that my words had killed my father. Now I am seventeen, and I know that is not true, but sometimes I still feel like it was my fault.

FINALIST

My Happy Unhappy Birthday

written by D. M. at Gemstone at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center

A few years ago, when I was seven, I was living in Myton with my grandparents and my two sisters. It was my birthday and grandma was taking me to the store to pick out a cake. As we were driving, I asked my grandma, "Why does mom remember my sisters' birthday presents, but she never sends me anything?"

She told me, "Don't worry. You have me, your grandpa and your sisters. It doesn't matter what your mom does." Grandma was trying to make me feel better, but it didn't help. I should have been in a great mood 'cause it was my birthday, but I was becoming sad because I was thinking about my mother.

Around three o'clock the party started. Everyone sang "Happy Birthday" to me. We had cake and ice cream, and we opened the presents everyone got for me. I was feeling much better.

Around five, I went outside and got in the bouncy house that grandpa rented. I was alone waiting for my sisters and friends to join me. As I sat there, I started thinking about my mom again. I kept asking myself, *What did I ever do to my mom to make her care so little about me? Why does she seem to care so much about my sisters?* I realized I was getting down again, thinking about the mixed feelings I had about my mom. Then my sisters and friends showed up, and I became happy as I celebrated my birthday with them.

A few minutes later I saw my grandpa coming out of the house, walking towards the bouncy house. I got out of the bouncy house and met him in the yard. At first I was excited to see him, but as he got closer, I could tell something was wrong.

I asked him, "What's wrong grandpa? You look a little sad."

He said, "Your mom called to see how everyone was doing."

He didn't have to explain. "Everyone" meant him and grandma and my sisters, but not me. She didn't ask how I was doing. I began crying because I always hoped that I would be remembered by my mother. But she wouldn't remember me, ever.

I looked up at my grandpa and told him, "Thank you for adopting me." He looked at me and smiled. After taking time by myself to think about things, I went back into the bouncy house.

Later we all built a fire and talked for a while. Then we watched movies and ate more cake and ice cream until it was time for bed. Now I am sixteen years old, and not much has changed. It was always hard the way my mom treated me, but that birthday was a day I'll never forget. Since that day I've talked with my mom occasionally, but it's only gotten worse. I won't let her ruin the rest of my life. I have my grandma and grandpa, and she's out of the picture.

FINALIST



Created at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center

I Was Just a Child

written by J. H. at Manti Youth Academy

My favorite thing that people say is, "It's okay. I know what you've been through." Or even, "I can relate." Those are the phrases that really get me.

I am sixteen years old. I have heard those famous phrases so many times I would need a couple of extra hands to count them. I usually just sit back and think, "I have gone through so much I wouldn't want anybody else to go through the things that I have lived through."

I was put into foster care at the age of two and then bounced from home to home for years. A lot of things happen in your first couple of years. The memories from an early age are called developmental memories. Usually they are positive; they help define who you are and who you will become when you grow older. Mine were all negative.

I had no mother, no father except for once a week when they felt like showing up.

From the ages of two to six, I was abused sexually, mentally and physically. I had no one to go to; no one cared. I stole and manipulated to get what I wanted.

*No mother, no father.
Left to fend for myself.
I was just a child.
No one cared.*

I was adopted on my sixth birthday by a nice couple. They were radio show personalities who lived in South Carolina at the time. It was rough. I'll admit I was far from easy to work with. I slammed doors, broke things and ran away. We moved a couple of times; each time the incidents became worse and worse.

I finally reached the breaking point at age twelve. We were living a couple houses away from my grandparents. I stole my grandmother's car and wrecked it. They were out of the country so they shouldn't have cared, right? They did.

Then I slit my wrists with glass, hoping that I would just be able to avoid my problems and not live through the consequences.

It was then at that point I was admitted into my first treatment facility. I fooled everyone, even myself, into believing that I was ready to leave. I was so not ready. That's the exact reason why I was booked into Ada County's DT. The judge was nice. He sentenced me to treatment in a small town, Koosharem, Utah.

I am now in treatment in Manti, Utah, working to actually get better, to actually help myself instead of faking it until I make it.

There's still a lot of trauma and a troubled past that I hold inside of me. Therapists tell me to cope with my memories and traumas. Is coping distracting myself so I don't remember? Or is coping remembering until it doesn't hurt when I think of the past? I hope that over time my wounds will heal.

*I was just a child.
No one cared.
Now I am a young man.
Now I care.*

FINALIST

If Only I Had Realized

written by B. B. at Slate Canyon Youth Center

Growing up while living in a crime and gang affiliated house definitely wasn't easy. Family and friends telling you, "Being a grownup isn't fun," but you tell yourself that life is nothing-but-a-piece-of-cake and you-got-this as you start a journey on a twisted road.

My journey began at eight years old when I started stealing, smoking pot and sneaking out of the house to go "hang out" with friends. I just wanted to fit in. Later, I began doing beer runs because we had no way to get alcohol. We just couldn't stop chasing the adrenaline that we got from all these stupid things.

One day we decided to break into a house and see what we could find. We were all really nervous, as the adrenaline flooded our veins, but we had to prove to ourselves and the Big Homie that we could walk the walk, so I just walked confidently up the stairs and knocked to check if anyone was home. "Boom, Boom, Boom!" No one answered. The coast was clear. I picked up a rock and threw it at the window. "Kabushhh!" Then I climbed in, unlocked the door so my homies could come through. We hit the jackpot – guns, knives, money, liquor.

When the owners got home, they of course called the police. The investigation found my fingerprints at the house; I didn't have any gloves on during the break-in, and there also happened to be camera footage. I was already wanted by the police, so I took off. It took them three months to find me. I was at the park when the gang unit pulled up on me, and I tried to run, but the officer tazed me.

In the end, my judge ordered me to a group home where I stayed for six months until I got kicked out. After that my life was more group homes, DT, and finally secure care at Slate. When I first got here, I hated the unit, and I didn't care at all, but six months in I started to change.

My mom had always told me that family is always going to be there, not your friends. I told her she was wrong. Yeah, she is my mom, but she doesn't know my friends, my situation. I thought she didn't know anything, but eventually I realized she was right. Every day I awake from my sleep in a room that has my bed and my toilet.

To this day I regret everything I did that put me here. I have learned that actions are always going to speak louder than the words and just saying "sorry" won't make it better. I now know that family is all you got in this life, and it sucks that your friends may not always be there, but in reality, giving up my friends was the best thing I've ever done. If only I had realized this sooner.

FINALIST



Created at Mill Creek Youth Center

My Recovery Adventure

written by S. F. D. at Gemstone at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center

When I was eleven, I started really getting into working on cars in the driveway at my Dad's house. Some days I would go to the junkyard with my dad and find parts for the cars. When the repairs were done, we would test-drive them, get them cleaned inside and out and get them sold. I really loved getting to work on cars, and I still do.

When I was thirteen, almost fourteen, I started using the drug meth. Both my parents were using back then and weren't around enough to know what I was doing, so I decided to use meth to numb my pain and my broken heart.

During this time I ended up falling in love with a young woman I still love to this day. When I fell in love with her, she helped me, and I stopped using. She helped me through a lot. I felt as if I didn't need to use again, but about halfway through our relationship I started using again.

I didn't think I was ever going to slip up and use, but I did. When I did, I didn't even work on cars or do anything really motivating other than ride my bike around. It became a problem when my parents starting getting clean because I was on the streets. Also, I left the one I fell in love with because my using problem was hurting us, and I wasn't down for breaking us because we were *broken* already. I didn't want us even more broken.

When I was fifteen, I would go to my Mom's to get clean. I would be clean for two or three weeks and help work on my parents' cars. When there was something wrong with the cars, I fixed and cleaned them.

When my grandmother died June 5, 2020, I started using again. My mother told me, if I was to use again, that it would be a life-or-death situation. I didn't believe her. I ended up going out and getting high again. It was about four days in, up four days straight. I ended up passing out. When I woke up, the ambulance and police officers were there. I knew one of the officers so I felt more comfortable. I went to the ER. The doctor said, "If you had been sitting in the van much longer, you would be dead right now."

After I got out of the hospital, I went to DT, got my head together. As I thought about it all, my life flashed before my eyes. I'm so very lucky that I am here today. I didn't die. I decided I really want to work on cars, go to Job Corps for automotive and have a good job. I want to graduate from Job Corps and stay clean. Now I want to stay clean and do the work I love.

FINALIST

Royal

written by C. Y. at Manti Youth Academy

“All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.

A light from the shadows shall spring, . . .
And the crown-less again shall be king.”

J. R. R. Tolkien

Some may frown upon me when I say I'm royal, “royal” meaning *suited to be a king; majestic*. I laugh in their faces. I do not mean that I am above others, nor better, nor privileged. Simply, I am myself, which makes me royal, majestic, wonderful. It applies to everyone. Once anyone accepts himself, and who he is, he is unleashed from the restraint of others. He is truly free, and I know I'm right.

I was not always like that. I would always run away from myself. I never wanted to be me. Stuck in this predicament, I always wanted to be someone else.

When I was eleven, I started getting in trouble. It peaked when I was thirteen. Now here I am, four years later, still in trouble. For two years, from the time I was fifteen to seventeen, I was in treatment struggling with my anger, paranoia and trust issues. And I ran away many times. I was not making any progress, and then I had a personal revelation. I woke up.

Something clicked though, and I slowly started listening and started lowering my barriers. I realized one thing, something that would change me forever: I love being me. Now, this is not because of the rebellion and selfish pleasure I have stolen in my life. No, not at all. No, I finally accepted who I am.

Fate and destiny are words that cheap soothsayers use to scam you out of money. I released myself from the constraint, the chains that bound me to misery. I started to be honest with people, and now I have progressed. I am going further and further towards the life that I want. Not you, not my parents, nor my therapist, but the life that I will reach.

*I will reach my goals.
I will live my life fully.
And most of all:
I will become happy.*

Now I will say one last thing to you. You need not listen; you need not heed my words. But, maybe – Give it a chance. Hear the truth in what I say.

A great man, Winston Churchill, Prime Minister during Great Britain's darkest hours, once said: *When going through hell, keep going.*

Now, I tell you the same. Keep going. Do NOT stop. Light your candle in the darkness. And you will be free. Like me. Find the gold within yourself. Treasure it, protect it, show your greatness to the world. Cast yourself free from your chains, be true to yourself and who you will be become. Then you will be royalty – like me.

FINALIST

The Truth

written by A. G. at Gemstone at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center

The truth? It wasn't a big deal at first. I thought I wouldn't get into any trouble. It would make us closer and bond us for the first time in about three years.

I was twelve when my fifteen-year-old brother introduced me to his friends. We hung out, and within a week, they showed me how to use nicotine and weed. At first I thought that it was something cool, and we didn't get caught. I mean not until I turned fourteen.

I am fourteen now. After two years of doing drugs, I got aggressive and started acting out. I got one of my first charges by getting caught with nicotine. My brother and I were driving in his car when we got pulled over for speeding. We hid everything so that we wouldn't get into trouble. The cop gave my brother a speeding ticket and let us go.

When we got home, our mom did a drug test on us. She said, "If either one of you come back positive, I will send your brother to Missouri to live with his stepmom."

When both of us came back positive, she sent my brother to DT until she got the plane ticket. After my brother left, I knew that I needed to straighten up. I started going to school, doing my homework and helping out around the house. I stopped doing drugs. My mom and teachers were seeing a big improvement in my attitude.

My mom told me, "You can start talking to your brother again."

My brother and I started texting. One day my brother told me, "Mom and you are coming to see me."

He was right. When we went to Missouri and saw my brother, I was full of excitement and joy. We were hanging out all day for three days. When I had to go back home, I was still doing everything that my mom had asked of me.

A couple of weeks later when I got home from school, my mom told me, "Get ready. We're going to pick up your brother. He was coming back home."

I was so excited! We picked him up, and for about two weeks I was still doing really well. Then one day he told me to skip school and go to a little abandoned house where his friends and he did drugs. At that point I knew that I couldn't hang around with him. I needed to keep doing good and show my mom that my brother was not the reason I had acted up.

I had some girlfriends who were good influences on me, but when they met my brother, they started doing drugs. Then I started doing drugs. I couldn't tell my mom what we were doing. I knew she would send him back to Missouri, so I just kept the things to myself. The truth? If I tell the truth, I lose my brother. If I tell the truth, will I save myself?

FINALIST

The Call

written by C. C. at Slate Canyon Youth Center

The day was like any other day. I woke up, did Spark exercise, ate breakfast, and went to school. It was the average day, and then it wasn't. About fifteen minutes after returning to my unit, the phone rang, and moments later, staff was at my door. "Your dad is on the phone." My dad never calls. We never really had a good relationship, so I started thinking about all the bad things that would have had to happen for him to actually call me. I nervously picked up the phone.

"Hey, your mom and brother just got arrested for possession of multiple stolen vehicles and possession of drugs with intent to distribute. They are looking at fifteen-to-seventy years in prison. Your sister was there with her kids when they were raided so DCFS took her kids, and they're in a foster home now waiting to see if anyone in the family can take them." Sitting there, not really knowing what to say, I uttered, "OK, bye."

As I hung up the phone, all I could focus on were my dad's words. Everything else went silent. I heard and felt my breathing become faster and more like ragged gasps. My whole body became hot. I could feel the anger bubbling inside. *How could my mom do this to our family?* I felt helpless knowing I was locked up for my bad decision, and I couldn't do anything to block the emotional pain eating me up inside. I headed straight to my cell. All I wanted to do was just sleep and escape the nightmare that was now my life.

The next few days were hard on me; I snapped at everyone. I had no motivation to do daily tasks, and I couldn't focus on anything except my dad's words playing on a continuous loop inside my head. Every day became harder, but that call was my wake-up call to do what I needed to do to get out of secure and in a position to raise my sister's kids.

Finding out about my mom hurt like a hot fire poker stabbed my heart, but it made me realize my life was headed in the same direction as hers if I didn't change. Not only did she leave me, but she also left my four younger brothers, and I don't want them or my future kids to follow this path. From the day that I received that call, I realized that now I have a calling to save my family from a life of hardship, pain, abandonment and struggle. I need to be there for my family and protect them the best I can.

FINALIST



Created at Mill Creek Youth Center

The Pain of the Run

written by N. C. at Manti Youth Academy

The pain. The pain of love, the pain of loss, the pain of not belonging. I have felt it all. I never chose this pain; the pain chose me. The run. I ran from the pain, I smoked the pain, I drank the pain, but the pain kept coming back like a bad hangover.

I choose to drink and smoke, and that only made the pain worse. I was just fourteen. My girl left me, my family left me, and I was alone. I met a friend who got me in the dope game, and that caused me to go on the run and caused me the pain of loss.

The pain started when I was twelve years old. I lost my mother. She was only thirty-two when she died. She had had diabetes since she was fourteen. For some reason my mother got tired of taking care of her diabetes. It was stressful to maintain the care routine. I lost her, and that caused me pain. After her death for about four months, I stayed in our house alone and took care of myself including going to school and buying groceries with her credit cards. My father lived in another state and knew this was going on. Finally my father said that I had to live with him. I did not want to go, so I chose to go on the run. I could have stayed with my father, but with all of this pain, I still never learned to stop running and face my fear, the fear of loneliness. When you run, you lose everything – you lose yourself and your life to the run.

I was on the run for about two weeks before my dad found me. Then I decided I had to move. For about five months I tried to stay with my dad, but it did not work out because I was used to staying on my own and did not like to follow directions. Plus, I kept getting in trouble at school with fighting, talking back and skipping school. My dad finally said, “If you had a dog, and that dog bit you every time you went to feed it, what are you going to do? Get rid of it.”

That is what he told me, and then he sent me to a treatment center. That made me angry, and I chose to fight even more when I arrived at the treatment center. And of course, I went on the run. That only lasted a day, and the cops caught me. I got kicked out.

I went home for a year to live with my dad, but all the problems were the same. I was still too stubborn. So now I am in another treatment center that is working out.

This is the pain of the run, the loss, the love and the pain of not belonging. I hope I will not have to run anymore.

FINALIST

What If I Had Stayed?

written by S. A. at Mill Creek Youth Center

When I was about six years old, I was playing marbles with my friend. I won so many rare marbles. Then my dad came out of nowhere like he always did and said, "Be home in ten minutes."

I was shocked because it was only four in the afternoon, and he knew I usually stayed out till late, about eight or nine. I went home. My dad had everybody seated on the couch. He told us, "I have good news." He told my mom, three siblings and me that we were moving to Salt Lake City in two months. I was kinda angry and told him, "I'm not going. I want to stay with my auntie."

He pretty much told me, "I am the man of the house. You are too young to tell me what we are going to do."

We had always lived in Johannesburg, South Africa. In the next two months my dad had to figure out what he was going to do with his grocery store and his hotel. I was so young that I didn't realize two months would fly by pretty fast. Next thing I knew everything was packed up, and my aunties and little cousins were crying and hugging my family and me and giving us precious presents, like jewelry and gold necklaces.

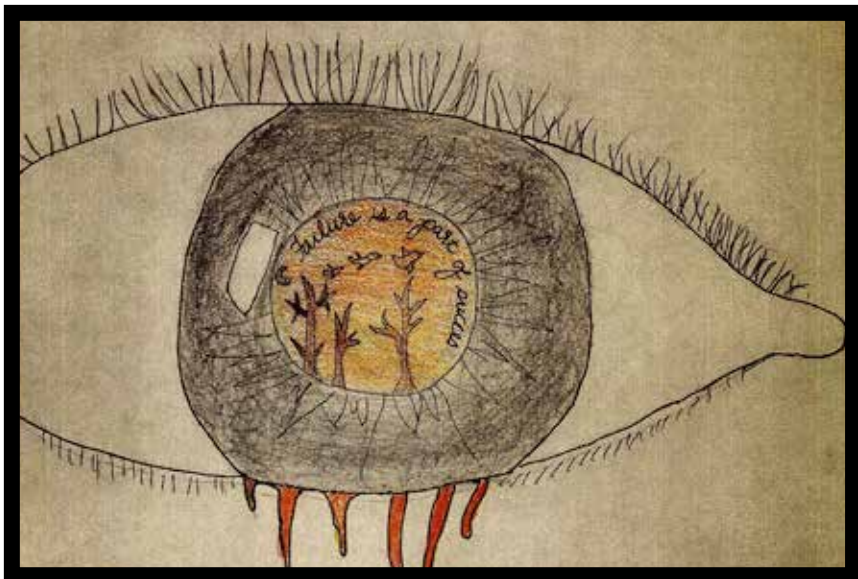
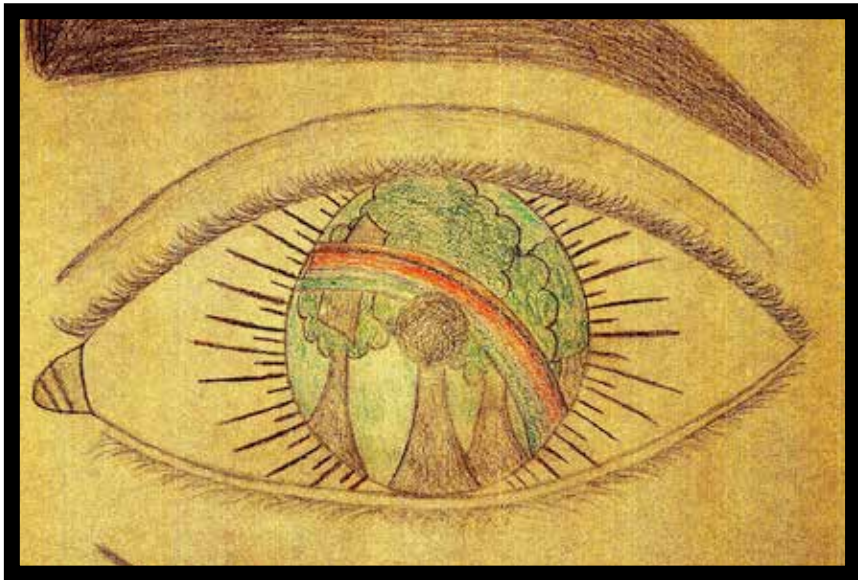
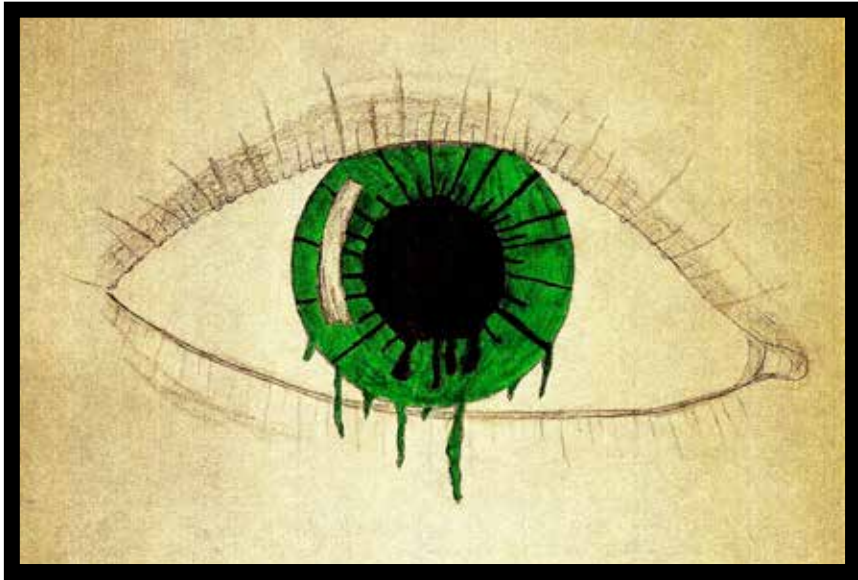
We drove to the airport in Johannesburg. I walked around and mistakenly got lost. I was so scared. A white guy helped me out and called out my parents' names on an intercom. I really thought I would never see my family again. My dad came to the desk and yelled at me, "Why don't you follow us?"

We got on the plane, and three days later we were in New York City. I've never seen so many white faces in my whole lifetime. We got on another plane and got to Salt Lake City. We had a townhome ready in South Salt Lake. We showed up in the night when it seemed pretty decent. In the morning we could see it was a filthy neighborhood.

First thing I saw in the morning were little Asian kids running around playing marbles. I was scared because I thought they were like Jackie Chan. I really thought they all knew karate and were going to beat me up. It took me two weeks to get out of my shell and walk around. After a while I realized Asian people were not so bad, but their food was nasty. I made a couple Asian friends and started playing marbles with them. That first year there was a lot of snow, and we had trouble adjusting to it. My mom even broke her leg.

I have been in Utah eight years, and I have had some troubles and been in trouble. I always miss Johannesburg and wonder if I had stayed there with all my friends if I would not be in trouble today. What if I had stayed?

FINALIST



Still Trying

written by E. A. at Canyons Youth Academy

Cotton candy, toys, play dates, picnics in the park with your parents, a worry-free world is what it should've been. Instead I grew up with a tweaker father and an alcoholic mother. Dad was running from the Po-Po, shooting up or beating my mama. Mom was working as a nurse or drinking herself half to death, leaving my five-year-old self and my three-year-old sister alone with our dad. Dad would beat us or lock us in our room for hours while he went to get dope or do horrible things to my mama. We'd be in there for so long we'd be forced to pee in the corner.

Most of the time, my lil sis and I would be left alone in the house. I was left having to take care of my little sister when I didn't even know how to take care of myself. Wasn't easy. Did you ever pour a bowl of cereal when you were five years old? Plus milk is heavy. This one time I tried to make a can of ravioli for my lil sis. I left a fork in the bowl, pulled the bowl out of the microwave and burned myself horribly. I knew the way life was, wasn't how it was supposed to be, but that's all I had.

Eventually my mom hired a nanny, who was the most amazing person. She brought us to our first park, swimming pool, movie theater, and introduced us to our favorite place, Arctic Circle, with the huge Play Place. But she knew we couldn't be with mom till mom was sober. So our nanny called DCFS. Finally we got a reset on life, or so we thought.

Our first foster home was a young couple with a few kids. We thought they were great for the first couple weeks. Soon they started locking us in a bedroom while they had family fun. They would always make sure they fed their kids first and us last. They wouldn't let us go swimming with their kids in their pool or play with them. Towards the end of staying there, they started kicking me into the backyard like one of their dogs for hours in the hot summer.

After a while one of their kids told the DCFS worker how we were being treated. DCFS pulled us out immediately and put us in a group home. Finally my mom went to rehab, but she could only have one of us. I went to a great foster home, and my sis lived with my mom.

But even after Mom graduated rehab, my sis and I never got that cotton candy. The struggle never ended. Now at seventeen, I am homeless and turning to marijuana to cope. Mama and sis are in a shelter, and we are all still trying. I am working toward graduating and becoming a firefighter, and my mom is working on getting her nursing license again. Someday we will all become a happy, healthy family.

FINALIST

The Past Is in the Past

written by S. S. at Manti Youth Academy

The first bad time. Lying asleep in my room, I wake to the sound of my father yelling at my mother, "You stole my f***** cigarette!"

My mother screams and wails for him to stop. This only angers him more. Now he grabs his belt and starts lashing my mother. He is drunk and probably high off meth. It is another night at my old house in Belen, New Mexico.

This goes on for a solid week. Then the police come to the house to take my two brothers and me into the custody of the State. I am crying, not knowing what is going on. I am five years old. If I am remembering correctly, I am actually thinking that I did something wrong and that I was going to be locked up in jail. I am confused. I end up alone in a foster home by the morning.

The second bad time. When I was six years old, my birth mom leaves my stepfather because he was abusing her. I leave with her. But my mom was still hooked on meth because of my stepfather, so I have to go back into State's custody. I end up in a bad foster home for a couple of months where I am neglected, including not being fed enough and mostly ignored.

The third bad time. When I am ten years old, I am sent to a treatment facility. I become violent in my foster home because I am being ignored and I do not trust my foster parents. I am throwing things and fighting with my foster brother who is getting all the attention. I stay in the treatment facility for six months, but the living conditions are not good. I finally leave and go to another foster home.

The fourth bad time. When I am thirteen years old, I am about to get adopted when my future adoptive parents start seeing my true colors. I am becoming defiant, and then I start to get depressed. Then the parents I have prayed for, have hoped for and loved decide that they cannot handle me. So I go into treatment for a second time.

Those were the bad times, but let me get to the good part. I have been in treatment for the past three years. I am in treatment now. I am getting help. My mother is doing better. I owe a lot of it to my foster parents who I lived with for over a year before I met my adoptive parents, who guided me to be the person I am today. They helped me realize that the past is in the past. They taught me to embrace the future. This is the lesson I live by now: *The past is the past. Do not let the past affect your future.*

FINALIST

Keep Growing

written by J. V. at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center

Since the first time I got in trouble with the law in eighth grade, things have never been the same. It all started in middle school when I met a couple of friends. They seemed really nice, or how we say it, “chill.”

It started by hanging out with my street friends after school, and I saw how they really were. Back then, the way I dressed and the way they dressed were really different. They dressed like street kids with big shirts, baggy pants and their colors. I wore just ordinary clothes. We were different.

Hanging out with them more and more, I felt like I was becoming one of them, including dressing like they did. I gave up things I loved like soccer, skateboarding, my real friends and who I really was, and I took up bad things like smoking weed and doing things we weren't supposed to do with my street friends. As the years passed, my behaviors got worse. Cops were involved in my life and knew who I was.

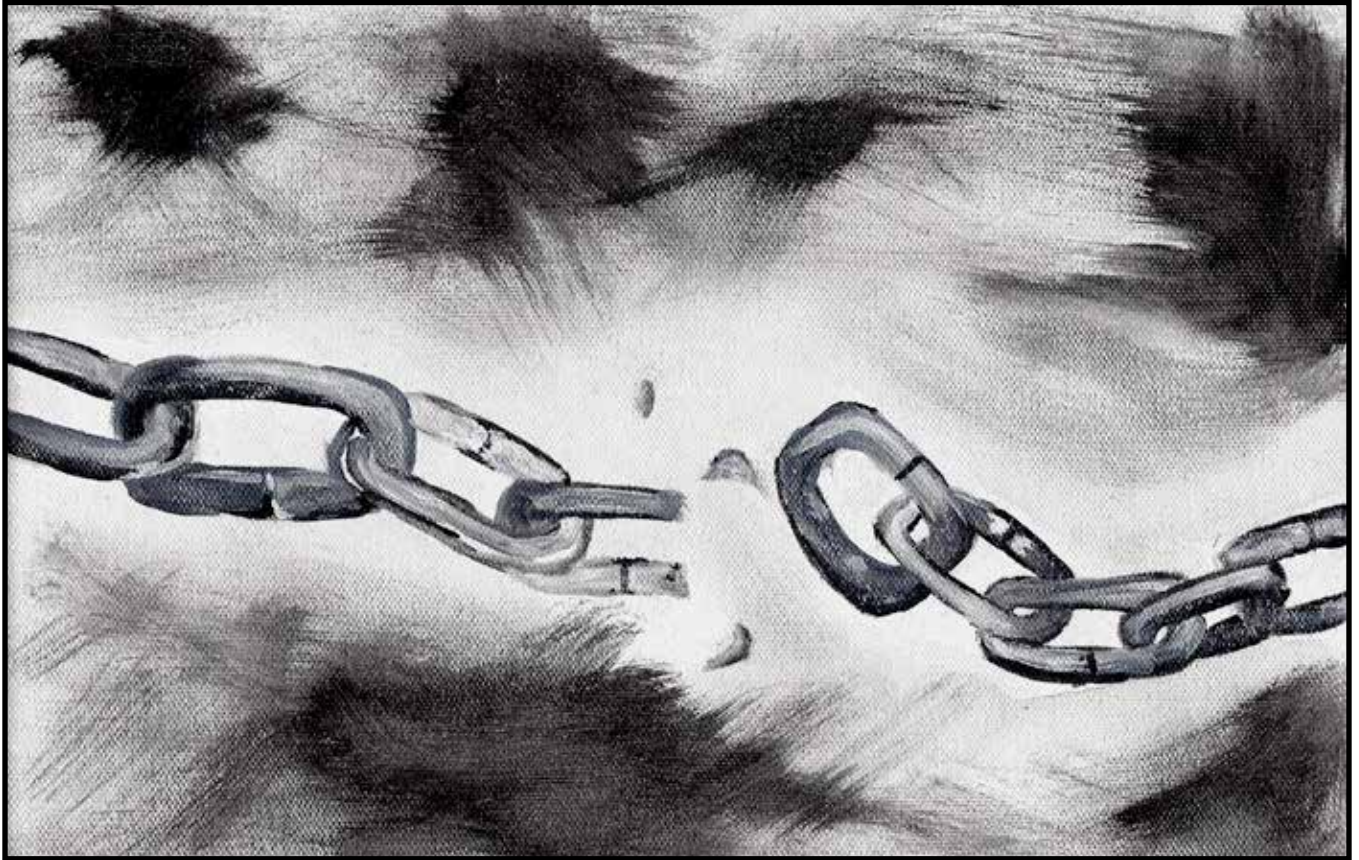
The first time I was arrested, I was scared because I never had been in trouble with the cops, but I was acting like I wasn't afraid because I wanted to act cool in front of my friends. As time went by, more cops were involved in my life. My family was sad that I was always getting in trouble, and they had to talk to the cops. And my street “friends” were getting locked up a lot. I told myself, *I have to change before I get locked up. Do I really want to be away from my family? My family is already hurt; I have to stop hurting them.*

So I changed for a little while when my “friends” got locked up. When things were back to normal and my friends were back out, I went back to my street life again. It all went wrong after that. We got involved in bigger crimes, and I got caught up. That was a big mistake.

Now I'm locked up, facing the decision of a judge. My family has really been hurt, and they're crying and worried because they don't know when I'm going to make it home. This is my story. I wrote this while I was locked up.

I was true to my “friends” when we were running the streets, but now I am stressing and worrying about what is going to happen and how much time I am going to get while my friends are still having a fun time. I am only fifteen, but I could go to adult prison. I'm never going to forget what I am going through right now. Since I have been locked up, I've been writing music, on the honor roll, doing things I really love and have grown a lot. No matter how things go in court, I am going to keep growing.

FINALIST



Created at Farmington Bay Youth Center

The Heart of an Addict

written by K. K. at Farmington Bay Youth Center

You would think I have it all – my looks, talent and personality. I'm the life of the party. You'll always see me with a smile on my face. Honestly, I'm a fun person to be around, so you would never even guess the demons I have lurking inside.

I come from a family where both sides suffer from addiction. My mom's side, alcoholism. My dad's, drugs. I started using drugs at the age of twelve, not knowing what I was triggering. I didn't believe anyone when they told me that marijuana was a gateway drug, but still I promised myself that I would never try anything else. The way I see things now, promises are made to be broken, and that's exactly what happened.

I was fifteen when I was introduced to meth, the drug that changed my life forever. I devoted my life to meth, and there wasn't anyone around to stop me. My dad left my life before I was born, and my mother had three kids when she was young so she never experienced the "party life." When I was twelve, my mom went out and did the partying she missed. I felt alone with nobody to depend on but myself for three years. Finally I thought I found an answer: I had meth. Meth connected me to a whole new world. It was the only reliable thing I had and that I felt could be trusted.

Even when I had to turn to stealing from, lying to and manipulating the ones I loved, I didn't seem to care. I became heartless, losing all feeling and empathy for others. I didn't care what my actions would bring onto other people, not even myself. Because of this I've been locked up about two-thirds of every year for the last six years either in DT, residential treatment or now secure.

As soon as I get out of a program, I can't seem to make it three weeks before I'm right back to the same stuff, smoking dope and on the run. It feels like a never-ending cycle, like I'm running in the same circle over and over again, waiting for new outcomes to arise. And all I can think to myself is: *When am I going to stop?* Some of the worst things imaginable have happened to me, and I still can't seem to move on.

So what do I do now? Two of my closest friends have just passed away because of drugs, yet I'm still unsure for myself. I know what I want to do. I want to be okay, sober, successful. It's not impossible to do, so why can't I just do it? I don't want to be another one of those people who wastes her whole life on drugs or ends up dead somewhere. I want a happy ending. So now it's up to me to turn my life around, and in all honesty, I don't know what I'll choose.

FINALIST

That Saturday Morning

written by D. P. at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center

That Saturday morning I woke up and told myself: *Today's going to be a good day.* I had breakfast with my family and in between the errands managed to get a haircut. But I had a strange uneasy feeling in my gut and a strange thought kept surfing my mind: *What if this is the last haircut I ever get?* Little did I know, my gut was speaking truth to me.

I went on with my day, trying to set this feeling aside, but it didn't feel right. I was afraid. I started showing more affection to my loved ones. I feared I wouldn't see them again. By 5:00 P.M. my fear became reality.

Everything happened so fast. I was arguing with a rival with my burner on my lap. It got hot. Then suddenly he shouted, "I'm going to take it." He went for my gun. Then he was gone. Everything changed. I panicked and hopped in my truck. As I was driving, I saw flashbacks of the best moments of my life all in seconds. I knew that would be the last happy time in a long time.

I snapped back to reality, thinking about what had just happened. *Why was I still here? I was supposed to be dead.* Instead of my body dropping, I saw another drop before by eyes. I could not believe what had just happened. I thought to myself: *This is all a dream. Wake up! Please wake up!* But everything was too real.

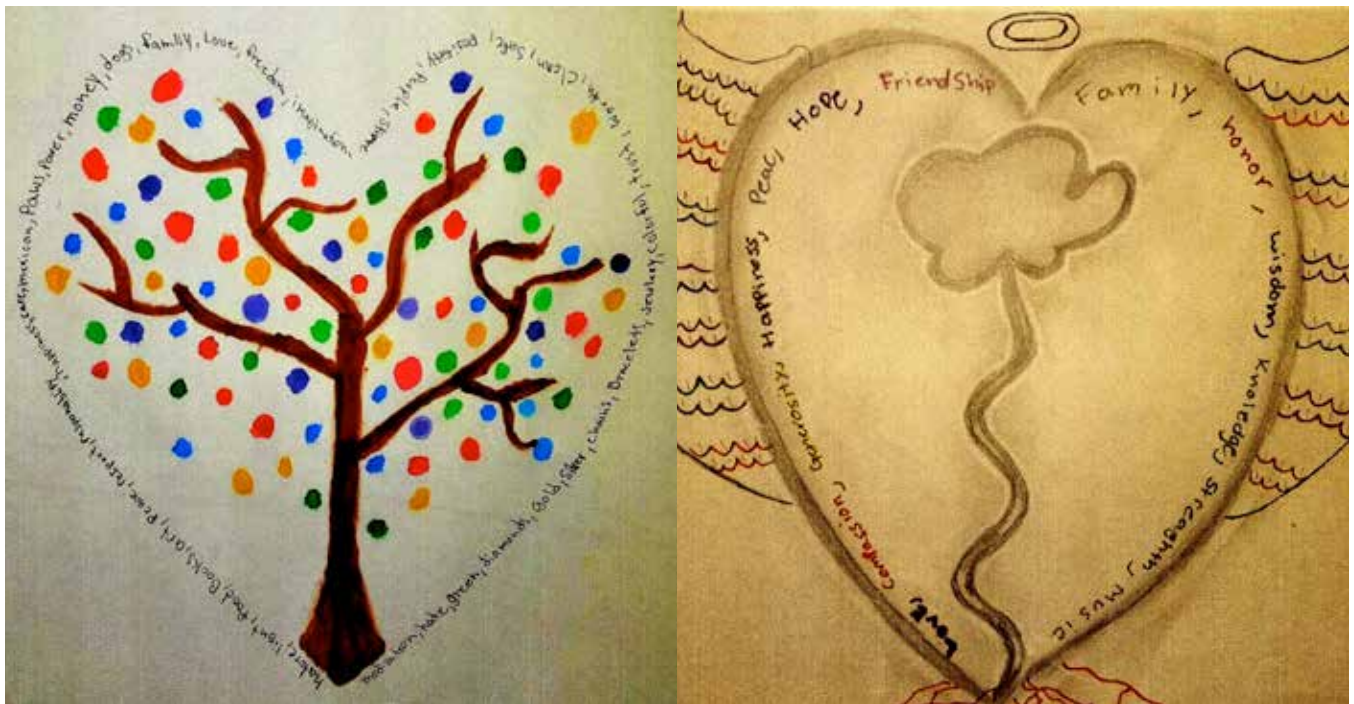
The next four days I was on the run, scared that people would misunderstand the whole situation. Nothing would ever be like that beautiful Saturday morning. My gut was telling me that too.

Soon enough I started seeing my old life fade away like a leaf falling from a tree in autumn. I had to face it – I was stuck with reality. I told myself: *If only I would've done this or that differently . . .* " But unfortunately it was too late, and "if's" weren't an option. I lived in denial for the next couple of months, trying to find myself in this new life.

Let me explain. I was now locked up, wearing the State's green shirts, sleeping on a two-inch mattress in an 8-x-10 cell where any warm feelings were quickly replaced with cold pain. Not only was the pain cold, but also the food, the concrete and the steel that greeted me every morning, the same sight every night before I closed my eyes. Every day I woke up to the same sight.

After three months of denial came acceptance. I gradually figured that everything happens for a reason. That day set me on a new course. I still wish I could go back to that Saturday morning, but I can't. But I can learn how to turn the bad times to good times. And it all begins with this small word called "change." I am young, and I can change.

FINALIST



It is only with the heart
that one can see rightly.
What is essential is
invisible to the eye.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery



Created at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center

My Mother's Tears

written by F. R. at Slate Canyon Youth Center

When I was sixteen, I was on the run, sometimes sleeping on the streets, sometimes on random apartment building stairs, sometimes not sleeping at all. There were also multiple warrants out for my arrest for DUIs and firearm felonies. I was the deepest I had ever been in my addiction, and I found myself doing things out in the streets to make any amount of money to support that addiction. It was the worst time of my life!

Each day was more of the same. I walked the streets of Salt Lake thinking about the same things, wondering if maybe one day I would see my family again. Mainly I was wondering if I was going to have a place to sleep each night.

Then, as I was walking one morning, I saw my sister drive past. She saw me too, pulled over to the curb and waited for me. I thought about running. My heart was racing, and my body temperature was rising. It felt like I was having a panic attack. "Should I really keep walking? She is probably going to call mom," I thought to myself but stopped anyway.

"What are you doing walking out here? Does mom know where you are?" she asked.

"I'm walking to my friend's house. He doesn't live too far away from here. Where are you going?" I asked.

"I'm going to work. I am not going to let you walk out here alone so I'm calling mom."

"No. Don't. I'm just walking to my friend's house! I'll be fine."

"Well, I just called her. She's on her way. I'm late to work, but she's about to pull up. You better wait for her!"

I really didn't want my mom seeing me that way, so I said "bye" and quickly tried to walk away, but it was too late. My mom was already there. I could see that her eyes were red and glossy. I hated seeing her like that, knowing her tears were the result of my dumb decisions. I wanted to run, but my feet were glued to the pavement, and I knew I shouldn't. The tears were flowing down her cheeks, so I quickly got in and hugged her. We sat there for what seemed like years until I finally broke the silence.

"I love you, Mom."

"I love you too. You have no idea how worried I've been knowing you were out on the streets."

"I'm sorry," I said quietly. The silence returned as she drove me home. Staring out the window, I thought about the many "I'm-sorry's" that had been said without genuine remorse. I meant it this time, but I knew just apologizing wouldn't do me much good; things had to change. I had to make better decisions.

I now know my mom is the only one that is going to be there for me, and I never again want my dumb decisions to be the reason for my mother's tears.

FINALIST

The Struggle

written by A. M. at DSI at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center

When I was seven years old, I lived with my mom, who was so hard working. She worked harder than my dad. All my dad did was drink, eat and sleep. My sister and I were used to seeing him like that.

My mom had been saving money for the longest time to get us out the ghetto. Her plan was to buy us a house and even bring my dad along even though he was a drunk. Mom only stayed with dad because he was our father.

Mom always wanted the best for my sisters and me. Finally she found a house and was ready to buy it. We got all packed and everything. The day we were "moving," my dad did not come back home, and that was unusual because the only time Dad left was to buy beer, and that was about it. He never took us to school, doctor appointments or even the store.

When my Dad had been sober, my Mom and Dad had had a long talk, and Dad had told her that he was going to "buy" the new house and get us all settled in. My Mom believed him because he was sober.

That day he left to get the moving truck. Hours passed by, and my dad still wasn't back. My mom had been calling him for hours, and she got nothing. My mom knew something wasn't right, but she wouldn't tell my sisters or me.

We kept asking, "Where is dad? When is he coming back?"

She kept saying, "Soon."

Nighttime came, and he still wasn't back.

My mom had told us, "Go unpack. Make your beds and go to sleep."

I knew something wasn't right because my mom started drinking. Usually she would drink just wine, but not this time. She was drinking vodka. I went to sit next to her at the kitchen table. I asked her, "Mom, what's wrong?"

She kept saying, "Everything is going to be okay."

I asked her, "Where did my dad go?"

She held my hand and said, "Dad isn't coming back ever."

"What about the new house?"

She answered, "Your dad took all the money I saved. He took it for himself and isn't coming back."

I was shocked. Why would my dad do something like that to us, especially to my mom. She was the most hard-working mom ever. She was a mother and father to my sister and me. I didn't know what to say.

My mom kept apologizing and saying, "We are going to be okay. I am going to get us out of the ghetto."

Now I'm fifteen years old, and I haven't seen my father ever since that day. Now my mom, sisters and I live in a big, beautiful house. My mom kept her word and got us out the ghetto. We have been doing just great without my father.

FINALIST



Created at Mill Creek Youth Center

To Become a Man

written by D. V. at Farmington Bay Youth Center

It's crazy how you go from being a child always asking questions about how the real world works to knowing how things really are. It's like when you are young everything is a fantasy and you never know what's really happening because you just don't understand. But somehow you always manage to stay happy, thinking everything is going to be all right and you'll grow up to be a football star or an actor or even one of your favorite cartoon characters. What I'm emphasizing is that life is all fun and games until you realize what's really going on and your fantasy slowly fades along with your hope.

People never really knew what I was going through; they knew the surface of my life but never really knew me deep down. I've been in and out of lock up since I was twelve; my mom likes to say, "Since you were in diapers." I don't want to sound "cool" or "gangster," it's just my role models were living the gangster-cool-locked-up life, with my brother, dad and uncle in prison. I always thought stuff like that was normal.

My mom tried to teach me many things, but there's only so much a mom can teach. We were always homeless, moving from shelter to shelter. It was all too much for me to handle, so I just bottled everything up. I regret not dealing with the pain of my chaotic life because as I got older the pain turned into me committing crimes. After a while my whole life was a lie because I never faced up to the real problems.

Now it's ridiculous. I'm seventeen and have a beautiful daughter, but I'm sitting in detention, wondering if I'm going to prison or not. It kills me every day. Every time as I step into my cell, my thoughts spill into reminiscing about my childhood and living that same fantasy I once dreamed with everything okay.

How can I be judged on the man I'm becoming, if there was no man there in the first place? There are so many hoops and obstacles you have to go through to get where you want to be. It's hard doing any of that when so many things have happened in your life that no one should ever go through, and you are still hurting from the past and what's going on now, still asking yourself: *Why can't I be more like someone else, someone who has it all, someone who has a man he can rely on, a role model who taught him the right way? Why? Why not me?*

When your life is full of why's and you have to teach yourself how to be a man, it is hard to become a man who is not stuck in between your old world and the real world. It's hard when you need to do things on your own. Life will always be different for everybody else.

FINALIST



Created at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center

Breaking Point

written by E. A. at Renaissance Academy

My curfew was nearing; it was getting late. I had to be home. I was biking in the direction of my house when I heard the sirens of an ambulance. I was thinking to myself, "Please don't come around the corner." Next thing I knew the ambulance came hurling around the corner in the direction of my house. I was thinking, "Where's this ambulance going?" Then it occurred to me – something was wrong.

As I neared my street, I saw the paramedics in front of my house. I sped there as fast as I could, a single tear falling down my face. I already knew why they were there. As I approached, I was praying everything was okay. Then I saw my mother crying just outside the house. My family held me back, telling me, "Don't go inside."

As I looked through the doorway, I saw an EMT giving my Dad CPR. Then tears started streaming down my face. We waited patiently till the EMT spoke to us, saying, "We got a heartbeat. We have to take him to the hospital immediately."

After my mother instructed me to stay home, she went to the hospital. I waited in distress for my mother to come home the next day. Once my mother returned home, she briefed me on the details of the situation, saying, "I'm so sorry. Your father had a seizure and a heart attack. The doctors put him on life support. Your dad only has a week." The week went by, and we had to say our goodbyes. We had to let him go.

The doctors offered to let us stay in the room during the procedure, but we decided to say our goodbyes and head to the hallway. Standing in the hallway, my family and I offered condolences to one another through hugs and tears.

During our trip home I stared blankly out the window. It was a rainy day, and I noticed the raindrops pelting the glass. When we got home, we talked to my grandfather, who is a funeral director, about options for a funeral.

A week later I found myself getting ready in appropriate clothing for the funeral. It was a sad occasion. After the funeral we headed to the cemetery. The car was completely silent with hopelessness. The funeral was filling me with anger, a sad kind of anger.

After the funeral I was in complete disassociation, and I wasn't eating or doing anything. I let time slowly heal the wound that would leave a scar in my heart forever. To this day I miss my dad. My dad was only thirty-nine when he died. I was just thirteen. Three years have passed since his death, and I have tried to hide my pain with smoking marijuana. That has not worked. I still miss him, but I know that he is watching me from up above and will be looking down on me for the rest of my life.

FINALIST

Writing My Wrongs

written by S. M. S. at Decker Lake Youth Center

I was one of those kids that grew up in the hood. I would hang around hustlers of the hood, selling dope, being active and getting to that money. It wasn't long until I would see myself behind the white walls and steal doors. My momma always told me, "Your friends aren't going to be there for you when you're behind the gates."

She was right, but I always told myself, "My friends are going be there for me, and I am not ever going to get caught."

Until that one day. It had been a nice sunny day. As the sun was going down, I was still hanging around the hood and waiting for my friend when a car approached real slowly. When the car stopped, I tried to see who it was. It was a rival, my rivals from another gang. We exchanged threatening words, and then at that moment he drew out his gun and started to shoot at me. My life flashed before my eyes. I threw myself on the ground, and all I heard were gunshots. I got up, grabbed my gun and started to shoot back.

Once they drove off, I got up, checking myself to see if I got shot. I was all right. That's when I noticed everyone in neighborhood was outside their houses and trying to check up on me. I knew I had to leave fast so I got in my car and drove off. It wasn't but a couple of minutes, and I got caught. I was busted, with the cops everywhere surrounding me.

I knew I was going be locked up for a while. I got investigated and harassed. I stayed quiet. They sent me to the detention center. I went to court, trying to get released. It was my very first time in the system, and I was caught up for shooting. They didn't find my gun. All they had were witnesses and bullet casings. I knew if I took it to trial, I would lose. I took a plea deal and got sent to secure.

I was lucky to get just a couple of months for this crime. I found out for myself that everything my momma had said was true. I saw who was real and who wasn't. My gang did not stay. My family stayed right by me, supporting me to do better, and I wanted to change the life I lived.

I learned that it's how you live your life, how you write your own story that matters. I got the help I needed once I saw the bigger picture. It's not all about gangs and selling dope. It is about family and my own future, what I can become in life. Now I am writing my wrongs and learning from my mistakes. I will not go back to the old me, the me of guns, gangs and the street life.

FINALIST

Fast Life: Hard Consequences

Written by G. S. C. at Odyssey Adolescent

My best friend and I have been through a lot ever since we were young hooligans. I met him when I was in fourth grade, and he was in fifth grade. We lived in a rough neighborhood where people couldn't tell the difference between fireworks and gunshots. Getting rolled up on by older gang members asking, "Who do you represent?" was an everyday thing.

My mom and dad were always worried about it but couldn't do anything because we didn't have a lot of money. It was hard for them to get a really good job because we were from Mexico. When I got into seventh grade, I saw all the struggles that my folks had been going through like having to pay rent on time, figuring out how we would eat for the week, and if we were going to have light at the house. I saw this struggle, and I wanted to do something about it.

So, my best friend taught me how to make money and how to move drug work, so I could help my folks. That's when I started getting affiliated with gangs and getting into trouble with law enforcement. My mother would pray and cry for me, and it hurt. But I had to do what I did to help as much as I could.

One day my best friend and I were going to meet up so that we could go to a party spot together. He told me, "I'll be posted outside. You just go where I am."

It was cold and windy night as I was walking to find my friend. As I got close enough to see him in the distance, he didn't see me because he was distracted on his phone with his back towards me. Then off in the distance I saw a car driving slowly with the headlights off. At first I thought it was just someone going home. I don't think my friend saw the car at all because he was still on his phone.

I was on the opposite sidewalk from him, and I called his name. I was about to cross the street when I heard tires screeching. Then I heard three gunshots and saw my friend drop straight to the ground. I hid beside a parked car and waited for the other car to be out of sight. Quickly, I ran towards my friend. I saw all the blood gushing onto the sidewalk. I froze and felt a shiver down my spine. I told myself, "No, it can't be, not my boy."

I heard sirens and had to run away. I left him there. He did not survive. I will never forgive myself for leaving him. Sometimes I think of revenge. Should I get even? But more often I feel guilty. Why him, and not me?

EDITOR'S CHOICE

To the Broken Ones

Written by M. G. at Farmington Bay Youth Center

Take a deep breath with me. Now forget about what you have to do, what you want to do, and just consider what I have to say.

I was recently asked in a discussion group: How I can help the world become a more compassionate place? My mind sifted through different ideas, scenarios and experiences, and I ultimately came up with one idea: Negative judgments linked to stereotypes, stigmas and labels. When we acknowledge a negative stereotype that we hold in our minds, embarrassing emotions arise, which no one wants to feel and lead us to become defensive. When we become defensive, we build a wall. This all comes from a single negative judgment. So, how do we become less judgmental? My answer: Empathy and compassion.

If you erase these judgments, if you just take a step back and think of all perspectives of your comments you have before you say them, you are already making a change. Empathy and compassion have more to do with your thinking rather than speaking. For example, just because you're locked up or received criminal charges, doesn't mean you're a "menace to society," a "junkie," a "murderer" or even a "criminal." All these labels have negative connotations. Just because you make a mistake does not mean you are that mistake.

I say this because I want you to know life is not out to get you. There are good people in the world. You deserve love and care. I made a huge mistake five years ago. Since then I have been incarcerated, facing the consequences of my horrible actions when I was sixteen. I have faced persistent, exhausting depression, countless miserable court dates, death of family members, self-harm, hospital stays and multiple privilege losses. I'm not sure what keeps me going, why I keep trying, but something inside me knows that there is something waiting at the other end for me.

One day I will go home to my family, have a car, go on dates and live my life again. Maybe that's what keeps me sane. Yes, I know I am facing the consequences of my hurtful actions, and no, I will never make that mistake ever again. I heard once that the purpose of correctional systems is to "correct human behavior and make the community safe." That's it. It is only through our actions and experiences, compassion and empathy that we can change our preconceived notions of the world from negative judgments, stereotypes and labels.

To the ones who have to take medication: You're not messed up in the head.

To the ones who cut as a day-to-day ritual: Stop. Your body is not a canvas.

To the drug and alcohol abusers: Ask for help and get it.

To the ones who faced abuse, neglect and trauma in your life: You survived. Stay strong, not just for yourself, but also for others.

To those who are locked up: I understand what you're going through.

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Three Strikes and You're Out

Written by B. S. at Slate Canyon Youth Center

"Are you ready?" asked the woman patiently, waiting to take me to my unit. It was my first group home, and I stood there thinking - *How bad could it be, right?*

"Yeah, I'm cool," I replied half truthfully.

She escorted me down to the unit. I was barely fourteen years old, but I was the hulk compared to the other kids my age, so they put me with the older kids.

When I walked into the room, the feeling was good. The kids were all just talking and playing games. Everyone in there seemed to be chill. I walked in and went straight up to the first person that caught my attention to try and talk to him. That was strike one.

"What's up, G? I'm Oso," I said.

"Hey," he flatly returned, then walked away. It was unexpected. I didn't know what I did wrong. I would learn it was one of many unwritten rules: Don't insert yourself into the community before you are invited. But I didn't know that then, so I repeated my introductions with the whole unit. That was strike two. I was rejected – every time. By this point, I was scared, but I didn't show it because I was embarrassed to show fear, and I was worried about being made fun of.

After being lonely for about three days, the small kid on the unit with little-man syndrome came up to me with his shoe in his hand and called me a "Beez-y." I looked at him, then the rest of the unit. All eyes were on me, and immediately my heart rate increased, and I began to tremble. I pulled myself together quickly and realized it was stupid to be afraid of him because he was very small, and I didn't want to look like a wussy in front of the unit. I told him to kick rocks. That was it. Strike three, and I was out. He threw his shoe at me.

With that I swung on him, and then the raging tornado hit. It turns out that the kid had mental issues, so when I hit him, every other kid on the unit hit me like a troop of protective gorillas. I was confused and disoriented, and I couldn't move until the staff was able to pull everyone off me and drag me out of the room. I hadn't broken anything because I had curled up in a ball, but I had two black eyes, goose eggs on my head, and my sides were swollen.

I really wish I would have known all of the unwritten rules for group homes before I went there and struck out. Knowing those rules going in would have saved me from problems like this, as well as so many others that happened there.



Created at Salt Lake Valley Youth Center

About the Story Readers/Evaluators/Judges

ADAM SHERLOCK is a writer, podcaster, musician and artist living and working in Salt Lake City, Utah. He has been working with youth in care for twenty years. Adam is the Community Partnership Director at Spy Hop. He is a member of the Promising Youth Conference planning committee. Adam oversees the Sending Messages podcasting program that has been teaching storytelling to incarcerated youth since 2009. He is an enthusiastic and irresistible force when he is working with at-risk youth on creative projects. He is truly the embodiment of creativity and artistic energy. He is the webmaster of the website www.youthcreatehere.org, which is a platform for the creativity of youth in care, including the Untold Stories Utah initiative and anthologies.

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 life-changing 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.

STEVE "DR. MAC" MCFARLAND, a sixty-seven-year-old father of four and grandfather of 13, graduated from Utah State University with a BA in psychology. He earned an MS in justice studies from Arizona State University and a teaching endorsement from the University of Utah. Steve taught literature, biology, theatre and social studies for 30 years in the Granite YESS Program at Decker Lake and Wasatch Youth Centers, Salt Lake O&A, and ARTEC. Dr. Mac is known for his extreme creativity and over-the-top sense of humor that he shared daily with his students and colleagues, and in numerous student theatrical productions, most notably, "Twilight Zone, the Musical." Steve's hobbies are literature, gardening, grandchildren, family history, distributing weird YouTube videos, spur-of-the-moment travel to Europe and amateur theatre. Five years ago Dr. Mac moved to Riverdale, Idaho, bought a red tractor and four yaks.

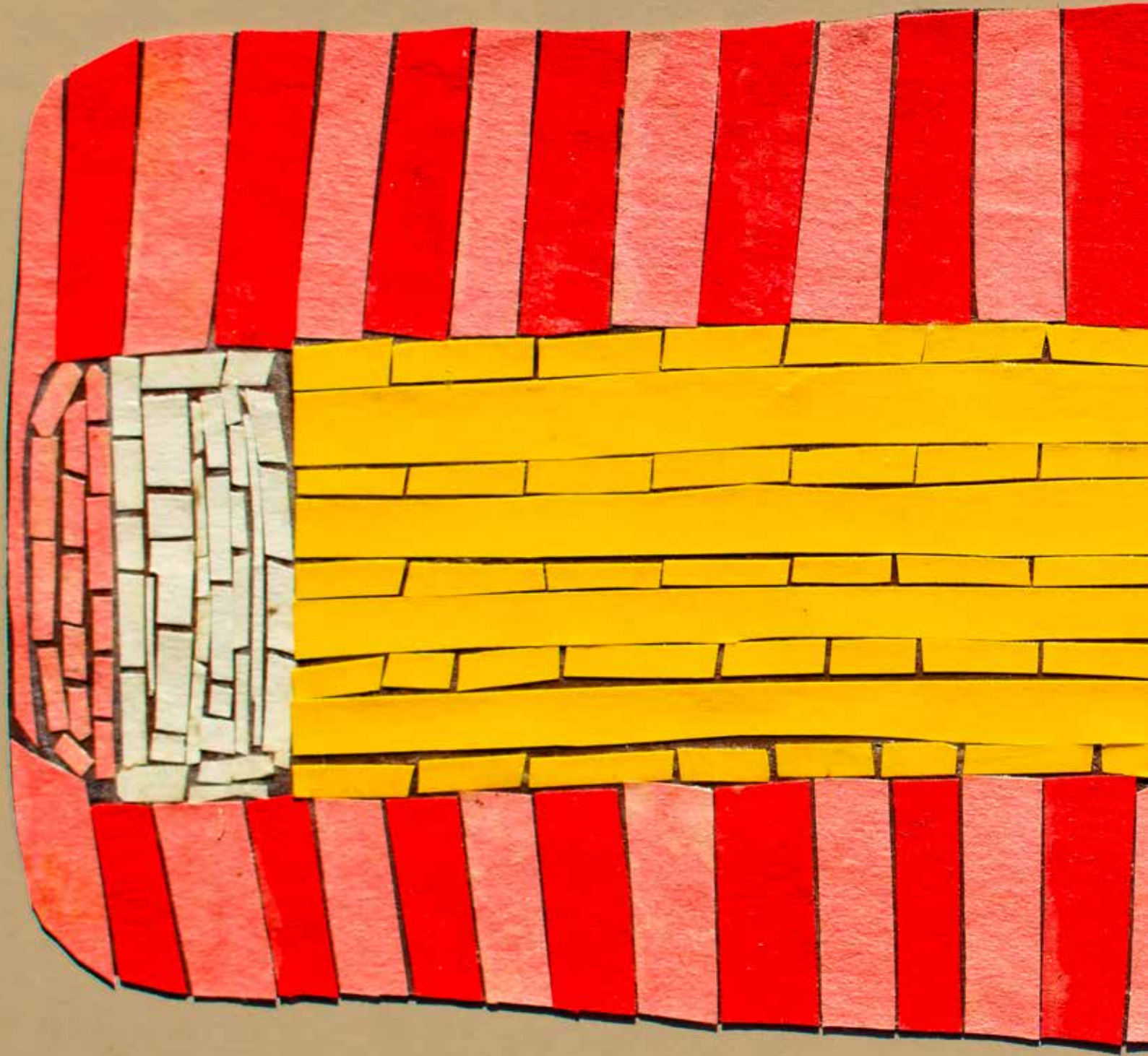
JACKIE CHAMBERLAIN is currently the Juvenile Competency Attainment Program Administrator for Utah State Division of Juvenile Justice Services. Previously, she was the public information officer for Utah State Division of Juvenile Justice Services. She has also served as the Education Liaison at the Utah Department of Human Services. Prior to this, Jackie worked in the Virgin Islands as a photo journalist 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