

we READ
YOUTH VOICES

WRITER'S CONTEST

2024 Anthology

All pieces are published with original spellings, capitalizations, and punctuations. We respect the growing practice of our young writers, the authenticity of their mistakes, and their bravery to write and submit an original piece in their own voice.

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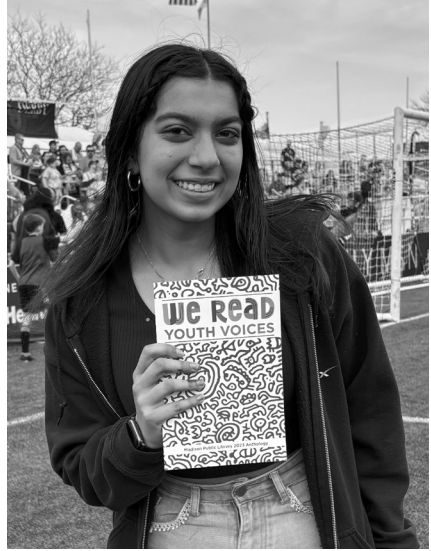
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Foreword

by We Read Youth Ambassador
Diya Dhawal

Heroes take many forms, they can come in superheroes or people we meet every day. One of the most heroic things that one can do is use their voice. It takes immense courage and strength to share your story. I am incredibly proud of the young writers who crafted these beautiful masterpieces. This year's theme was uniquely



interpreted, and in a strange way, it brought all of humanity together. The infinite small acts of kindness and heroism depicted in these pieces remind us of the true impact our actions can have. These stories are all a fragment of our lives, but together they create a mirror which reflects the true good nature of humanity. I had the honor of Hearing these voices, reading these stories, and believing in these small acts of heroism, and I believe that each one of these stories brings out a hero in all of us.

Remember that your voice is your greatest superpower. Use it to heal the world.

Speak English!

by Grace Huang, age 16

Breathe in. Breathe out.

In through the mouth, out through the mouth.

I had many nosebleeds as a kindergartener, but this was my first in-class one. Standing by the teacher, I pinched my nose with a tissue-sheathed grip.

“Does anyone want to take Grace to the nurse?” the teacher asked. Or something along those lines—I hadn’t learned English yet, but I was a good guesser.

Itching my heel with my sneaker, I squirmed before what seemed like a mushroom field of blonde and brunette heads. It felt like an auction.



I was a piece no one wanted. Maybe nobody raised their hand because the Chinese girl didn’t need help—or wait, is she Korean?

Either way, I was funny, but I never meant to be. I was only funny because you could say anything to me and I would just blink. Sometimes I would even nod. In reality, I knew some English—a few licks of it. Enough to peel Speak English! from the glares of the boys at recess, to pluck Speak English! from the confetti of giggles who always followed me down the hallway and into class. I was a hummingbird caught in a nest of wind chimes—except instead of the wind’s music, I heard the music of English and laughter.

Back in those days, I was gold. Soft and easily dented, but solid enough to resist turning to glittery dust. I smiled with my classmates’ laughter because I always smiled whenever I saw anyone else smile.

Sometimes, I wondered if my classmates didn’t even want me to speak English. What jokes would be left, what music?

Everyone liked to be around the Asian girl, but never with her.

Even in my gory tissue-flowered panic, I remembered a few names in the classroom. Including Elizabeth—I knew Elizabeth because she was the only Black girl. Elizabeth was quiet, elegant, and a little bit shy. She never laughed at me.

When Elizabeth shuffled over to me and reached out to take my hand, I accepted it numbly. My clammy hands grasped her small, cold fingers. They were slender and so smooth that, especially in memory, they felt airbrushed. They reminded me of feathers.

The hallway lights flickered on when we stepped out of the classroom. We passed wooden locker cubbies, strolling through an aisle of Spider-Man and Sleeping Beauty backpacks. Around us, glaciers of soiled January snow thawed off of boots and into puddles. The hallway was silent except for my mouth breathing.

In through the mouth, out through the mouth.

As we turned the corner, Elizabeth reached over, arm arching over my head. She pinched down on my bulbous nose. For a moment, we were both squeezing my nose. Then, my hand flopped down to my side. She stared firmly into the distance while I stared at her. Finally, her gaze flicked onto me. A smile peeked out. It was small, but it radiated warmth.

I suddenly wanted to cry. Cry because nosebleeds always made me cry. Cry because I didn't know what to say—or because I knew exactly what to say but just didn't know how.

Thank you, Elizabeth—for pinching my nose even though you knew you'd get your fingers dirty. For accepting me. For being unafraid of judgment, unafraid of laughing wind chimes. For showing me that love exists in the classroom.

But I didn't say anything. I didn't even cry. Under layers of Kleenex, I smiled softly—a smile that I soon had to bite my lip down on to keep from shooting up to my cheeks. At some point, I gave up and grinned silly for the rest of our walk.

Once we arrived, the nurse swabbed my nostrils with thick Vaseline. Jelly that heals you when you're hurt. Sitting on the plush leather chair, I giggled as I swished my legs. I laughed because the cotton swab tickled—but really, I couldn't stop laughing because my heart was swelling from the blossoms of a new friendship.

Friends hold hands. Amazing friends even pinch your bloody nose! They will do the right thing even if no one else volunteers. Even if you're caught in a nest of wind chimes, and you're soft and easily dented, and you can't Speak English!

The next day, something unexpected happened: I actually looked forward to going to school. I looked forward to seeing Elizabeth. I looked forward to making more friends. Maybe next time someone had a bloody nose—or a skinned knee or a paper cut in their heart—I would be the one to take their hand. I looked forward to offering kindness of my own. To, hopefully, one day, inspire a new friend like Elizabeth had inspired me.

Now, I know English. I recognize the music for what it was—but I also recognize the quiet strength of warmth, acceptance, and selflessness.

A Spark

by Nora Irene Moran, age 11

When you offer your umbrella to someone without one, you make a difference. Then they are not wet, so when they walk into the bakery to help their mum at work she doesn't have to clean up the water.

Now she'll be able to give an old man who had a tough day a fresh croissant. He can go back to work at the doctor's office in a good mood and help a little girl with a broken arm.

Now the little girl can go back home and her whole family will be reassured that she's ok. Now that this little girl's mother knows her daughter is alright, she can go on the vacation she's been planning to see her sister in Mexico.

Her sister is an elephant conservationist giving a speech about how to save them, and she goes to her sister's speech.

The girl's mom talks to a little boy on the bus about the speech and he decides to come along.

The little boy goes to the speech and takes action and informs his class about what he learned. Then his class makes flyers about how to save the elephants.

A famous zoologist reads this flyer and posts this on social media. Thousands of people read this and it gets in the news. A few weeks later this reaches your family, and they tell you what they read.

And it's all because you held an umbrella for someone.



there are no stars here

by Ash Gartler, age 14

I am 9, walking alone back to our flat in the city. I am heading toward my home, sliding between tall buildings with windows that reach upwards into the dark sky. I am 9 now, and I am old enough to walk home alone. I am disobeying my parents, but I am 9, so I am old enough to make my own decisions. I keep walking, passing the dirty men on the streets. They are bruised and skinny, they do not have clothes like mine. I see a small boy reach his hand out toward a man walking by. The man moves by, glancing down at the boy, before turning away. I keep walking and I notice it is darker now, and every broken window I pass seems to look more and more violent. I am 9 now, but I am scared. I look up into the sky, looking for stars, but there are none, because there are never any in the city.



I walk walk walk and hide my face until I see a store ahead of me. In front of the building is a man with his head in his hands, crying. The man is weeping for someone, saying a name, a name, a name. The man is asking God for love and crying, crying, crying. I feel bad for the man, the man without a flat in the city, without a home to walk back to at night. So I walk into the store and pick up an apple, and standing on my tippy toes I slide the cashier 2 quarters from my pocket. I leave the store and give the apple to the crying man. He takes it from my hand carefully, and I feel all the bumps of his hand; they are not clean like mine. He looks at me, and I see him. He has a face, and hair, and a body. He holds the apple like a trophy and cries, but this time they are happy tears. He says to me I am blessed, and I deserve the love of God, far more than the people that claim to receive it. I don't know what he means, because I am 9 and I do not know what a God is, but I cry for him because he is sad, and I am glad I made him happy. And I hug him, wrapping my arms around his dirty shirt, feeling each hole and tear in the fabric, each hole and tear in his heart. And he thanks me, even though it is just an apple.

I leave, because I am 9 and I am scared now that it is dark. I look back at the man as I walk away, he is holding the apple to his chest and praying to the sky with no stars. But I have to leave him, and I am scared now that I am alone. I run to an alley, away from people, away from the world, where I am safe, where I can cry. I cry because there is nobody to give an apple to me here, I cry because there are no stars here and the alley is dark, dark, dark and it smells like garbage and smoke. Behind me, I hear a man, then I see a man. He has a warm smile, one that makes you feel safe. His eyes look like stars, they are bright and I no longer feel alone. The man asks me what's wrong, and I tell him I am scared and I don't know how to get home and I miss my Mama and Papa. He reaches for my hand and holds it tight. The man says he knows a way for me to feel happy, to feel free. The man says he can help me, he can make me feel good. I trust the man

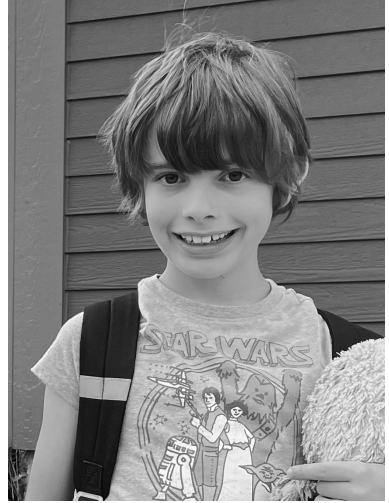
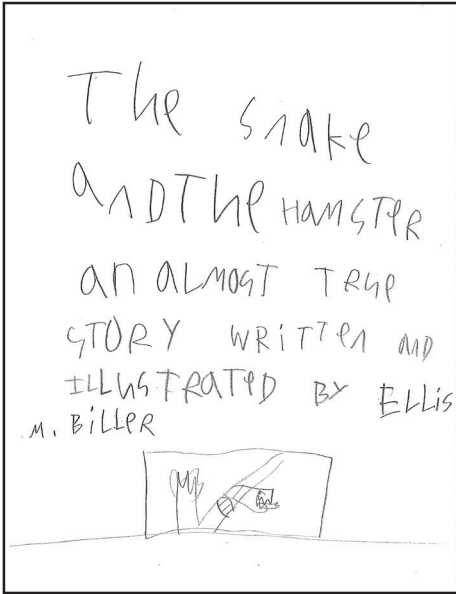
because he is a man and I am not, because he is a grown up and I am not. And he hugs me, but it doesn't feel like a hug. I ask him what he is doing, and he says he is hugging me. He pushes me against the bricks of a building, which hurts, and I begin to cry. He covers my mouth. His eyes no longer look like stars, and his smile no longer looks warm. He pushes against me and I kick at him and cry for help. He hits me across the face. I see stars, though not in his eyes. I scream more, I scream and yell and punch him but it does nothing because he is a man and he is strong and I am not because I am 9 and I am not a man.

I fight and fight until I hear another man come into the alley and he screams at the man who doesn't hug. The bad man throws me against the wall and tries to run away, but the other man stops him. I run out of the alley and fall against a wall of a building. I hear the dark eyed man shout and I hear fighting and punches and hitting and words I've never heard before. The man who hits runs out of the alley, stumbling away with red liquid falling from his nose, hitting the pavement. I wonder if it will stain the pavement, if it will always be there.

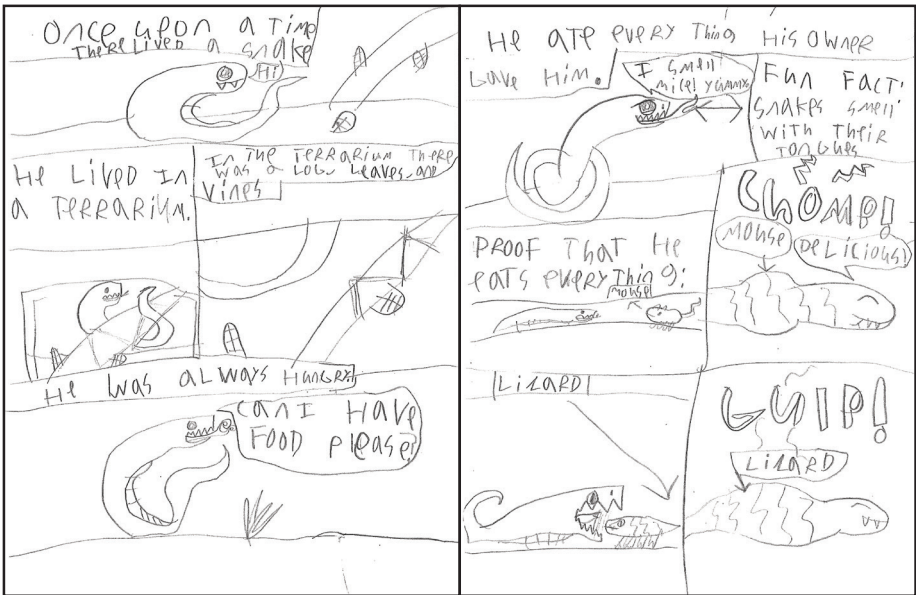
I hear some noise and I watch as the crying man from outside the store runs out of the alley, holding an apple high above his head. He runs to me and falls onto his knees. He is crying, he is crying for me. He prays to the sky as his tears mix with the blood from the scary man's nose on the ground. And I thank him, even though it was just a man.

The Snake and the Hamster

by Ellis Biller, age 9

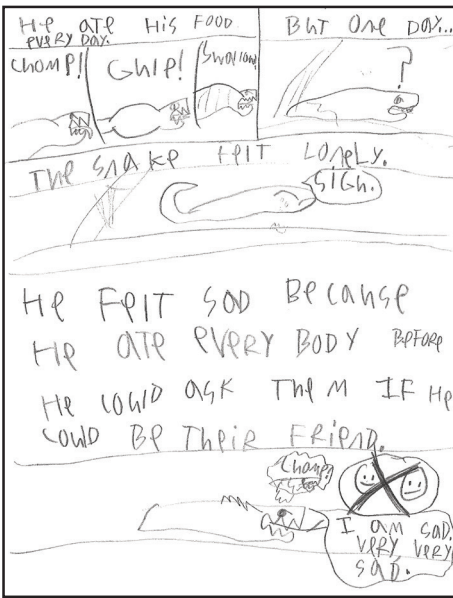


The snake and the hamster: an almost true story written and illustrated by Ellis M. Biller

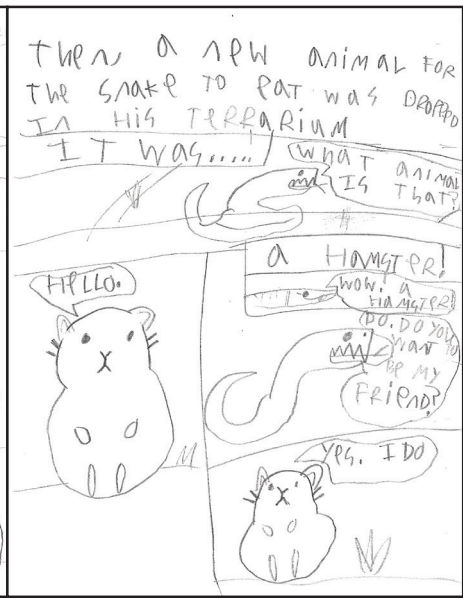


Once upon a time there lived a snake. "Hi!"
 He lived in a terrarium.
 In the terrarium there was a log, leaves, and vines.
 He was always hungry.
 "Can I have food please?"

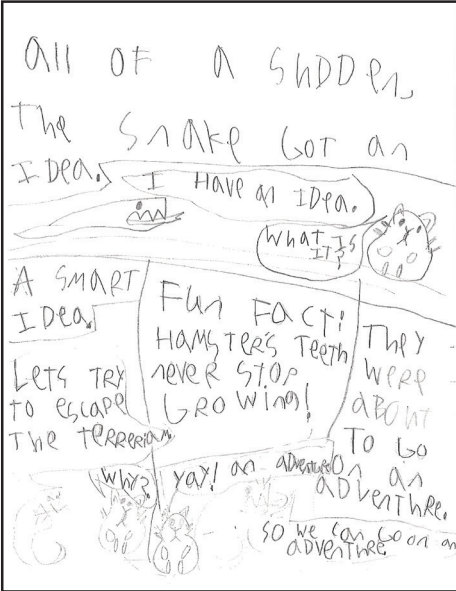
He ate everything his owner gave him.
 "I small mice! Yummy."
 Fun Fact: snakes smell with their tongues
 Proof that he eats everything: MOUSE
 CHOMP! (Mouse) "Delicious!"
 LIZARD
 GULP! (Lizard)



He ate his food everyday.
 CHOMP! GULP! SWALLOW!
 But one day...?
 The snake felt lonely. "Sigh"
 He felt sad because he ate everybody before he could ask them if he could be their friend. CHOMP.
 "I am sad. Very, very sad."



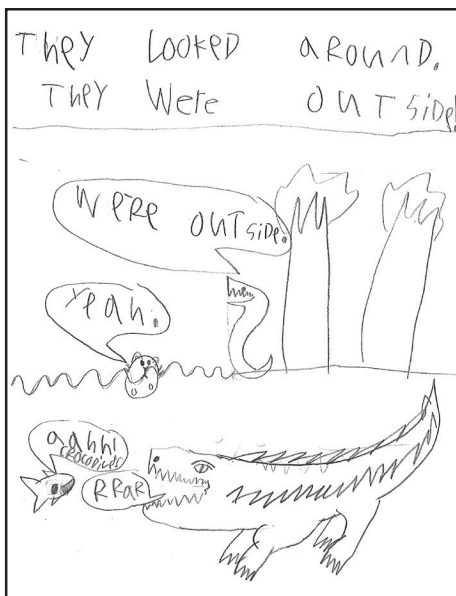
Then, a new animal for the snake to eat was dropped into his terrarium.
 It was... "What animal is that?"
 "Hello."
 A hamster! "Wow! A hamster!"
 "Do you want to be my friend?"
 "Yes. I do."



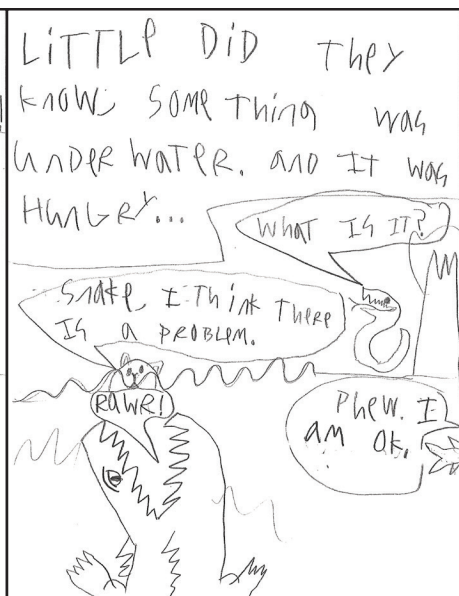
All of the a sudden, the snake got an idea.
 "I have an idea." "What is it?"
 A smart Idea. "Let's try to escape the terrarium."
 "Why?"
 Fun Fact: Hamster's teeth never stop growing!
 "Yay! An adventure!"
 They were about to go on an adventure.
 "So we can go on an adventure!"



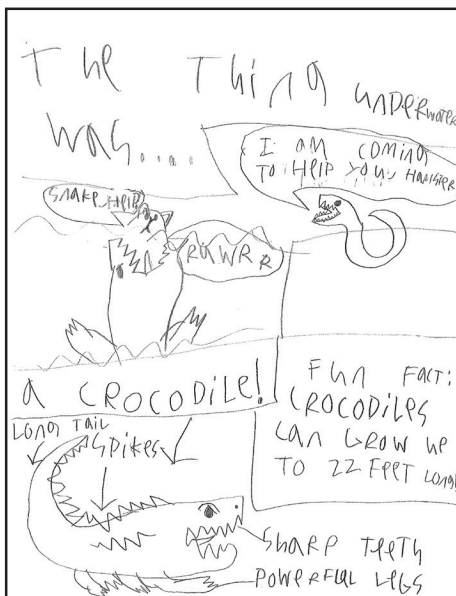
They jumped and slithered out of the terrarium.
 "We're out!" "Yeah!"
 They looked around the house.
 "This place is large." They saw a window.
 They climbed out of it.
 "Look a window."
 "Let's climb out!"



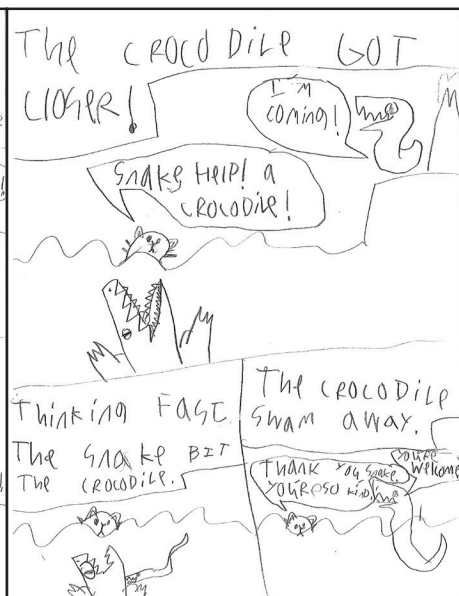
They looked around.
They were outside!
"We're outside." "Yeah."
"Aahh! Crocodiles!" "RRAR"



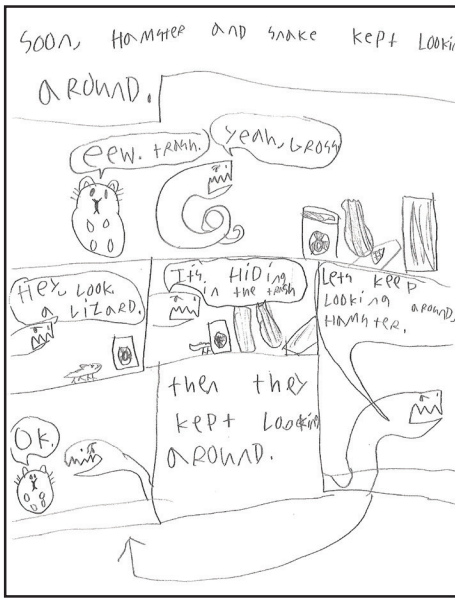
Little did they know, something was
underwater, and it was hungry....
"Snake, I think there is a problem."
"What is it?" "RAWR!"
"Phew. I am ok."



The thing underwater was...
"Snake help!" "RAWRR"
"I am coming to help you Hamster!"
A CROCODILE!
Long Tail, Spikes, Sharp Teeth, Powerful
Legs
Fun Fact: Crocodiles can grow up to 22
feet long!



The crocodile got closer!
"Snake help! A crocodile!"
"I'm coming!"
Thinking fast, the snake bit the crocodile.
The crocodile swam away.
"Thank you snake. You're so kind."
"You're welcome!"



Soon, hamster and snake kept looking around.

"Eew trash." "Yeah, gross."

"Hey, look. A lizard."

"It's hiding in the trash."

"Let's keep looking around hamster."

"Ok." They kept looking around.



Meanwhile, back at the trash....

"Huh?"

"What's in here?"

SPLASH! "OOF!"

Growing.... Growing...

Growing... Growing...



LIZARD-ZILLA IS BORN!

"REEAARK"



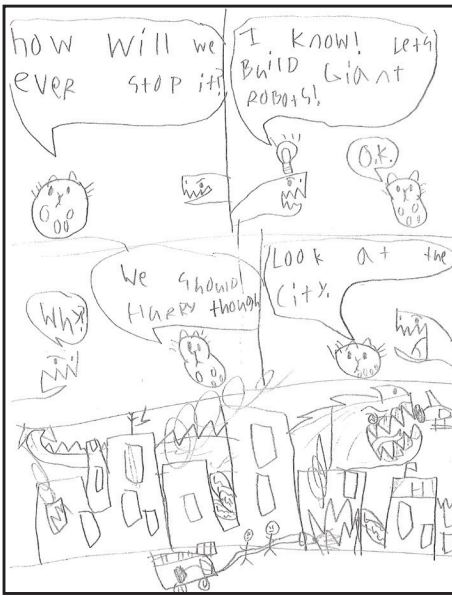
"I am taking out the trash."

"GASP!" "What's going on?"

"A giant monster blew up my house."

"Where is the monster?"

"Over there." "It's HUGE!"



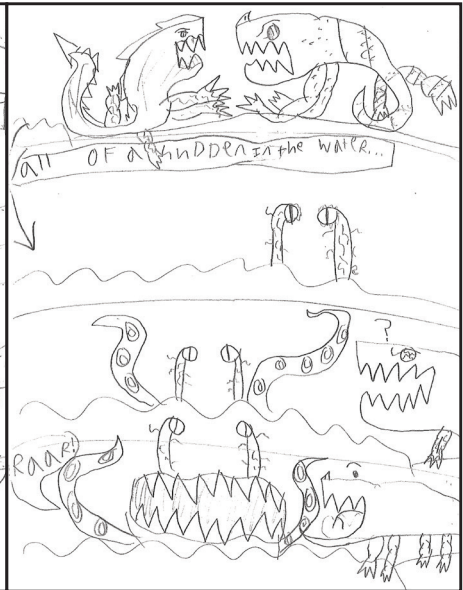
"How will we ever stop it?"
 "I know! Let's build giant robots!"
 "Ok."
 "We should hurry though."
 "Why?"
 "Look at the city."



Five years later...
 The world:
 "Hamster, I finally finished my robot!"
 "I call it Mecha-Lizard-Zilla."
 FACTORY: "Oh no! Lizard-Zilla!"
 PRESS FACTORY
 "CRASH!" FACTORY "WRAAWR"



VS.



All of a sudden in the water...



"AAH!"

"Hey, monster, over here!"

"Come and get me!"

But then...

"RAAR!"

"RRR?"

"Thanks for saving me snake."

"You're welcome. What was that thing?"

"The kraken."

"You're my best friend."

"You too."

WORM

"What's in here?"

THE END

Saving Strangers

by Lily Nguyen, age 11

I look outside, gazing at people walking by. To most people, they think of them as strangers, anonymous people taking a nice walk. But those people could really be heroes. When you think of heroes, you might think of someone fictional, like Superman. Or, you might think of a person in real life, like Harriet Tubman.

Those are people who save others because of kindness. Of course, random people on a sidewalk couldn't save lives. Right? Well, they definitely could. Just picking up a piece of trash could save a life. But how could that effect lives?

Well, here's a story about a baby sea turtle named Mila. Mila was born on a sandy beach under a bright moonlit night. Predators were watching the huge cluster of hatchlings. Birds flew overhead, sharks swam silently in the water, and scavengers dug to find the unhatched eggs. These newborn turtles have to traverse their way through these obstacles. Even when reaching the water, predators could still eat them.

Despite all these challenges, Mila didn't lose hope. Mila waited for more hatchlings to hatch and they waddled across the sand, oblivious to the looming predators. Soon the beach was flooded with shells. Birds swooped by scooping up some unfortunate turtles.

Mila used the crowd as an advantage. She quickly crawled to the awaiting water, ignoring her siblings chirping for help.

It was survival of the fittest. She finally felt the comfort of the lapping waves. Exhausted, she rested and adapted to the cold water. A screech came from overhead as a bird swooped down right beside her. Luckily it caught the hatchling beside her. Frightened, she dove into the water, scanning her surroundings.

A few other baby sea turtles had made it. The struggle is over, Mila thought. Just then, a shark lunged at her. Her life flashed before her eyes. But Mila was just able to dodge the sharp teeth and saw a piece of coral. She swam to the safety of the coral reef, hearing the snapping of bones behind her slowly fading away.

Hungrily, she bit into the coral, enjoying the taste. After having her fill, she lay down on the sand, and slept. This became her daily ritual. When she reached a year old, she started eating things like jellyfish and crabs.



Her favorite food was moon jellyfish. While swimming around, hunting for food, she spotted a jellyfish, hanging like a ragdoll. She quickly swam towards it and bit into it. Instead of the usual gelatinous texture, it felt tough. She tried to spit it out, but it was too late. The weird animal was stuck in her throat, choking her. She struggled to breathe.

Mila closed her eyes, fear striking her heart. This is it; this is the end. After all my struggles at the start, it's wasted because of this. She gave up, too tired to fight. Her last breath withered away. Her heart stopped and her brief life had ended too soon, all because of a simple piece of trash.

That's what could have happened, instead, a girl named Emily and her mother were walking across a beach, on a sunny day in Florida. The little girl saw a trash bag on the sidewalk. Her mother led her around it. Emily turned her head as they walked by, wondering why it wasn't where it belonged. "Mom, can we stop for a second?" The girl asked. Her mom nodded and was about to ask why, but the girl turned around and grabbed the bag by its handle.

She walked to the nearest trash can and threw it away. Emily smiled, proud of her accomplishment. "Come on sweetie, we best get going." Her mom called. The girl ran back towards her mom.

The piece of trash Emily threw away, just saved a life. Maybe even hundreds of lives. Mila never really encountered that bag because the girl threw it away. Mila lived happily and the next year, she laid her own beautiful eggs. Those eggs hatched and the circle of life continued.

Emily saved all of those lives without even knowing what could've happened. She didn't know who Mila was, she just did it to help the community.

By just having a kind heart, like Emily, you can save strangers. That's what an everyday hero is about.

Moon

by Sofie “Whispers” Tregre, age 10

No one notices. They won't notice this. I repeated the words to myself every time I did something helpful. And it was always true. Until one day someone did notice. They noticed right away. They noticed all of the helpful things that I did. They noticed me picking up trash on the playground. They noticed me putting stuff away. They noticed and noticed and noticed. Until one day they confronted me. They said one simple word.

“Hi.”

I looked down, feeling the words were spoken for someone else. No one ever talked to me.

“Hi.” They simply said again.

So they were talking to me. For that moment I couldn't speak any of the words I had been holding back for years, even though it was what I had wished for my entire life. The kid seemed to understand.

“Not a talker- got it.”

I finally forced myself to look up at their face. They had peachy hair and forest green eyes, and skin the color of sand. A pleasant face. A welcoming face, inviting me to speak my unspoken words that I had so many of.

“Hi,” I said, somehow managing to say something. I was stunned at my own voice. It was soothingly melodic and made of quiet whispers yet somehow big and powerful made of thunder and rain.

They also seemed to understand that. So they asked me a question.

“What's your name?”

“Tai.” I said, somehow being able to speak more of my unspoken words. But I didn't like the word I had just spoken. It was a girl name, and I hated it. The kid also understood that, like they could read my thoughts.

“My name is Finn, but I don't like Finn. It's a boy name.” They said, pretty much repeating my thoughts.

“So are you a girl or a boy?” They said, voicing my unspoken question.

“Neither. I'm non-binary.” I said, feeling speaking become easier and easier.



“Hm. So am I.” Finn said.

Finn started to ask a question, but I interrupted them, Wanting to speak a question of my own.

“Do you have a name you’d rather be called?” I asked Finn.

“Yeah, I’d prefer if you called me Quinn. I like it better. But do you have a name you’d rather be called?” They asked me.

“Yeah, please call me Moon,” I said. I liked Moon. It was a good name. It reminds me of the stars and how there is a bigger world out there. Much much much bigger than we know. And how I am small and how all the helpful things I do are even smaller and what we are made of is even smaller. And how we may be small we can do big things, that can change the worlds we have so many of. I learned to speak today. I am glad I learned to speak. Now I can change our world with words. I will speak words of change. Of peace. Of inspiration. Of all.

Littles

Lucky the Leprechaun: Makes a New Friend

by Alora Lotus Coleman, age 7

Once upon a time, there was a leprechaun. Her name was Lucky. One day she went on a walk. She got lost and then she found a magic carpet. She did not know that it was a magic carpet. Then Lucky stepped on the carpet. The carpet lifted up into the sky! "Put me down you stupid carpet." But since she said that that the carpet sat her down. Then Lucky said thank you. Then the carpet was still sad. Lucky gave the carpet a hug and said "you are the best carpet in the WORLD! Because you listen." Then the carpet gives a hug to lucky. Then they became friends. But still had fights and that's OK. "Friend are really the best."



The Adventures of Juliette and Jack

by Devin Kothari, age 7

One morning after a stormy night, Juliette and Jack were watching the news. On the news they saw a big yellow blur flash through the sky. People by the blur froze and fell down immediately. Then the kids saw an weird person. The person said, "I know that the blur wants to freeze everything on the Earth." "How do we stop it?" Says Jack. "You must find the crystal sword and summon the baby mystery dragon," says the weird person. "What is the mystery dragons power?" Asks Juliette. "That, is unknown, but I know someone who knows the powers of the baby mystery dragon," the weird person says mysteriously.



Then, Jack sees a lever behind the TV. "Should we pull it?" Jack and Juliette say in unison. The weird person disappears into sand. Then, Jack says, "Let's go through the door!!!" "It may be dangerous to go there?!?!" Says Juliette. Then Jack says, "No! I am going through the door"

Without saying a word Jack bursted out of the room. Then Juliette fell in the sand and she fell on Jack. Jack says to Juliette, "I found the crystal sword!!!!!!"

But then the weird person appears and drops down on the crystal floor. "You need to find the staff that has the colored crystal in it. It can shoot strong magic. You must be careful!" Then Jack says, "Bye weird man! Get out of here! We want to do the quest alone!!!!!!!!!!!" Jack storms off and Juliette starts to cry. Suddenly, Juliette feels something and then she immediately freezes. Jack realizes that his sister wasn't following him. "UH-OH! Where is my sister?!?" Then he immediately jumps up and runs to where his sister is. But, it was too late, Juliette was frozen!

Jack was just a small boy. He's only 2 feet tall. His pet beetle named Maggie jumps up and bites the blur in the blurs face. The blur falls down to the crystal floor. The blurs real identity was actually a chicken. Then everyone that got frozen started to crack. Then suddenly the big crack separated the equator. Then a big treehouse sprouted from the crack. The treehouse had big, blue crystal vines dangling from it.

Four people greeted them and their names were Zoe, Mrs.Becca, Olivia, and Matteo. They were warning the people of Brooklyn that a magical force was coming. But no one believed them except Jack and Juliette. "The magic forces are coming for you!"says the weird man. "I thought you were gone, you weird man!" Jack says. Then the weird person said, "You dodo! The magic strikes when you argue!" The magic hits the weird guy. "Oh-no! The magic hit him!" Jack and Juliet say in unison. Juliette's pet bunny named Izzy springs out and kicks the magic forces with her legs. Then they set on a quest to find the person who knows the baby dragon's power. Then the person tells them that the dragon has electric powers. The end!

The Little Potato Hero

by Jason Bergman, age 8

There was a lonely farmer. He likes potatoes so he was thinking maybe I can start a potato farm and I could just have a bunch of potatoes for company, hmmm it will probably be fun. So he started planting a bunch of potatoes, everywhere. So one year they were all grown and then somehow they were alive. And he said: "Wow" and all of them said: "hi don't eat us!" They were making their village. And he said, "No, no way I'm never eating you guys, you all can be my friends." Then one potato flew up, that was Tater, the hero. He said: "sure you can be friend with us, but don't eat us." So they were friends and they were having a good time. But then the weeds start growing, but the super hero Tater fought them off. And here is the song:



Song: The Little Potato Hero

Potato hero
Potato Potato.
POTATO hero
potato hero
he is one of the best
he is the best
he's potato hero
he fights the weeds the dandelions all sorts.
The farmer loves him
and thanks him very much
he gives him his own place.
Take this weeds uppercut ooh take this also yeah and
saves everyone
potato hero
potato hero
his name is Tater
he is the best
HE'S THE LITTLE POTATO HERO.

Big Ben

by Clara Cochran, age 8

"I love you mom," I said as I walked into the door of my new school. My name is Clover. I moved from Colorado to London. Today is my first day of 3rd grade. Today we are going on a field trip to see Big Ben. I am very excited but nervous.

When I got to class I was one of the only ones there. Ms. Walsh told me to pack my bag for the trip. When everyone was there we boarded the bus.

The bus ride was kind of rough and Jon threw up all over the bus driver and he quit so we had to walk the rest of the way there. I told Jon "Whenever someone says something just ignore it". He listened to me and just kept walking.

When we got there people still made fun of him then he started sobbing. Ms. Walsh didn't hear until I screamed "STOP IT!" Ms. Walsh walked over and asked what was happening. I was the first one to say something, I said I was just trying to help.

The next day the kids that were bullying Jon all had to stay in from recess and write a letter of apology. When I got home I told my mom everything that happened. She patted me on the back and said "Good job honey". And that is the power of friendship!



The Girl Who Was Scared of Standing Up

by Ignacia Escalona, age 8

Once upon a time, there was a girl named Sparkle. Sparkle was scared of standing up. Every time she tried to stand up, she got scared and stayed silent. Yesterday, on the bus, her friend Luna got teased. Sparkle wanted to stand up, but she got scared and stayed silent; Sparkle felt miserable. Sparkle's friend felt terribly sad. On the bus home, Sparkle was quiet; she felt sad because she didn't stand up for her friend and made her cry.

When Sparkle got home, she told her mom "I'm not brave I don't sparkle. Why did you name me Sparkle?" her mom told her. I think you are brave, and if you persevere, you will feel great because you will help others, and that is love. Sparkle said, "Do you really think I can stand up?" her mom said of course you can. You are amazing.



The next day, on the bus, the bullies were teasing her friend Luna again and saying you're a useless girl This time, Sparkle stood up and said "That's mean. Do not tease, my friend." For the first time, Sparkle felt brave. When Sparkle got home, she immediately told her mom what happened at school. Sparkle said, "I stood up." Her mom said "that's amazing, honey." Her mom asked, "Did you shiver? Did you sweat?" Sparkle answered, "yes, but only a little." Her mom said, "remember, you shine and sparkle." Her mom said, "when you shiver, remember that you are amazing, and you sparkle."

The next day, on the bus, no one teased Luna. Sparkle felt amazing and strong. On the way back from school for some weird reason, someone started teasing Sparkle. Sparkle did not feel strong and felt sad and weak. Sparkle felt like standing up was for babies.

When Sparkle got home later that night, she tried to go to sleep, but she kept thinking about what happened at school. When she finally went to sleep, she even dreamed about what happened at school, and it felt to her like she had done something wrong.

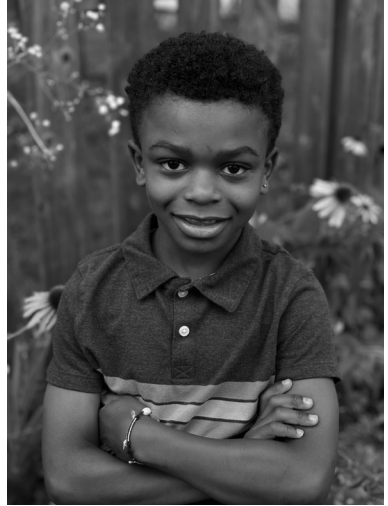
The next day at school, she was very quiet and could not stand up. She felt like her grades were getting worse and worse. She felt like she was very weak. When she was going back home, someone she didn't know got teased she was going to stand up, but she was too shy. The person got teased, and they started hurting him. Sparkle carefully watched, and she realized how important it was to stand up. She also realized that it wasn't only important to stand up for kids at school but it is also important to stand up for the poor and many other things. She realized that standing up could make very big changes in the world and that one day, she would, too. She became a very important activist and helped change the world.

A Helpful Person

by Jay'Liah Zaire Lamberg, age 8

A helpful person who I see every week is my gymnastics coach Miss Grace. They're very kind, they're very patient with people, and they help me get better with my form and flips.

When I first went to gymnastics, I felt really safe because they would always help me and they wouldn't get mad if you got something wrong. And things got way better when I got to know her and the other friends in my group. There was one friend in my class who needed a little extra help and Miss Grace taught him how to do things that he thought were hard and now he knows how to do them, like jump straight with his arms up and tuck jump. It made me feel like if it's easy for him to learn it could be easy for me. I know she can teach me what I want to learn.



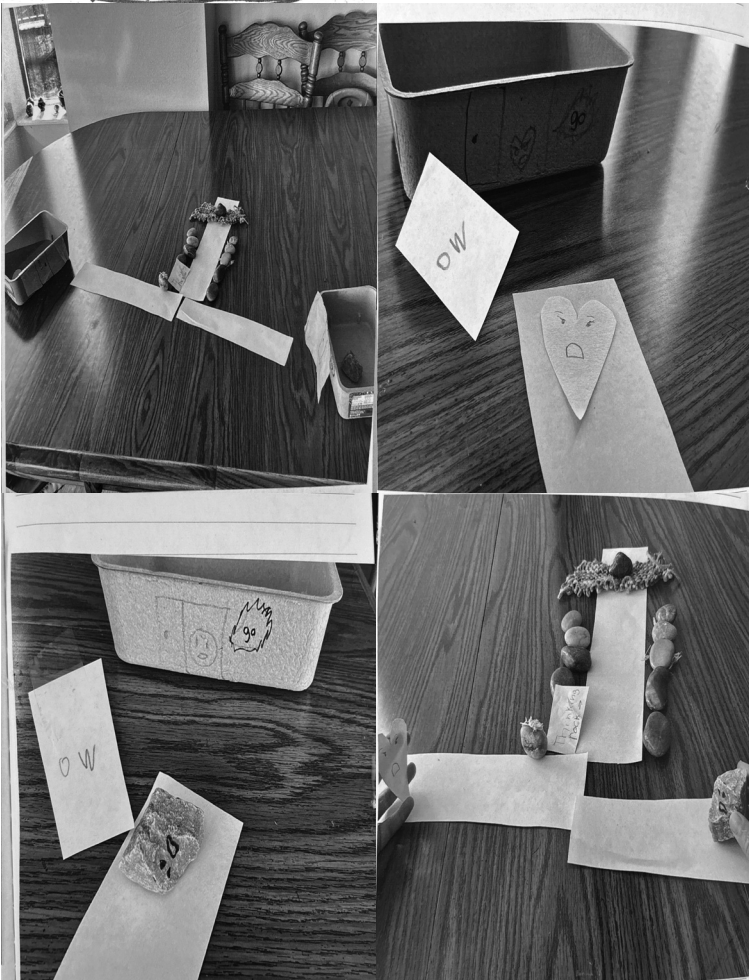
Miss Grace makes me feel really excited about gymnastics and she makes things way funner than I see on shows. She gives us directions that are fun and not all tough to do and she's really funny. I don't know how I would learn any of the flips I know without her. Now I know how to do back tucks and front flips and other cool tricks without anybody telling me to do things differently. She has been a really helpful person for me and she has helped me feel proud.

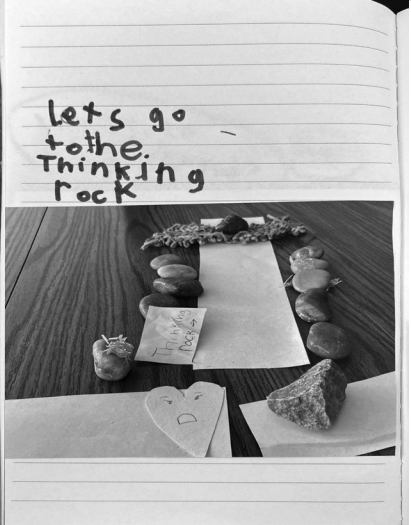
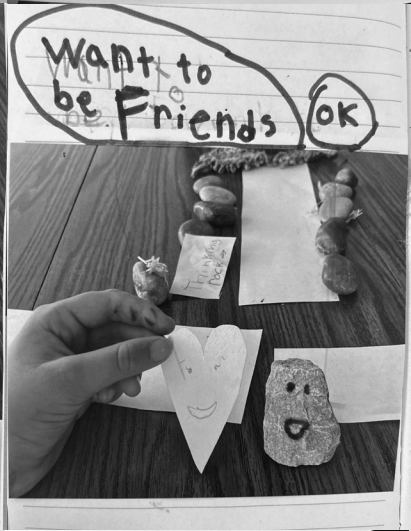
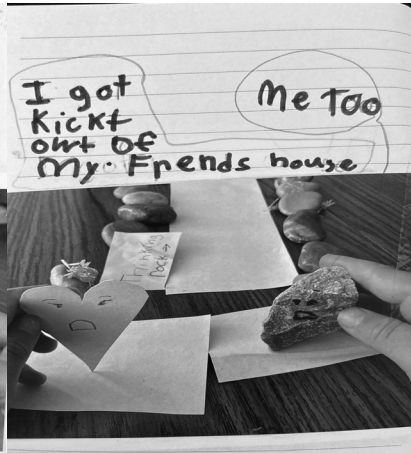
Rock and Heart Are Friends

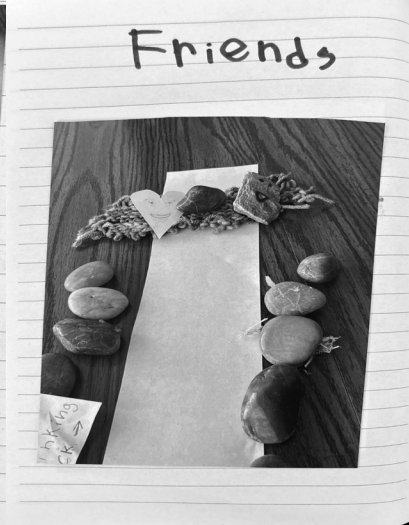
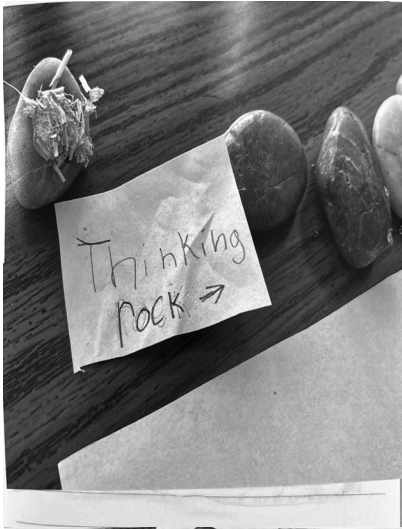
by CL Peacock, age 8

FRIENDS

by CL Peacock







Friends

Friends can be not
rise sum times.
but a new friend
will all was shoe! up.

-ciel

The End

by ciel Peacock

Josh the Recycling Hero

by Maddie Sklansky, age 8

Josh wants to be a recycling hero because he thinks if people don't litter and pollute we can have a great world.

So one day Josh is walking home and he sees a piece of paper littered. Josh picks it up, throws it away and continues his walk. When Josh gets home he puts on his green shirt that says **RECYCLE** in big bold letters. He goes down to the park with a garbage bag and picks up thirty pieces of trash!

That night Josh is busy in his room making signs and planning how to save the earth from pollution and littering.

The next morning Josh goes to the dump and takes home ten trash cans. He places them all around the park so people don't have to walk so far to throw something away. So maybe they won't litter as much because a trash can will be closer to them.

The next morning Josh goes to the park. His idea worked a little. Josh is somewhat disappointed but Josh goes back to the dump and gets ten more trash cans. Josh places them around half of his neighborhood. Then he goes back to the dump and gets more trash cans and puts them around the other half of the neighborhood.

That night Josh picks up only twenty pieces of garbage, ten from his neighborhood and ten from the park. Josh is ecstatic; his idea is working!

The next morning Josh makes signs to not litter and puts them on all the telephone poles in his neighborhood and the park. Then he looks around his neighborhood, and there are zero pieces of trash! He looks in the park- zero pieces of trash! His idea worked! Josh is satisfied with his work; because of him now people litter much less in the park and his neighborhood.



One Day at Dive

by Jack Snell, age 8

It is just a normal day at school. Today our specials are art and library, my two favorite ones. In art I was drawing very detailed things. In library we were coding. I love coding. Also, I have diving lessons this afternoon. At diving we are doing front lineups. At free time I was about to jump off the five-meter diving board with someone, but he was scared. I said "it'll be fine." He trusted me. "Five!" (that meant we could jump, so we did). When I saw him, I asked if he was okay. He said he got hurt on the face a little, but it was still fun. Then dive was over. When I got home, I counted my money. I could buy a Rubik's cube solver!

The next day I went online. I bought the Rubik's cube solver, but I still wonder... is that guy okay?

The end



Celebrating my Small Hero

by Omar Nazir, age 9

In the city of Madison, lived a young man named Hamzah. He is the eldest of 3 siblings, me, him, and my other older brother, Bilal. Hamzah had to take up an insane amount of responsibility when I was born. When I was born, Hamzah was only 9, whereas my other brother Bilal was only 6!

When I was a baby, Bilal was still being treated in a way he was still the youngest, but obviously I got the most attention. Most people say that Hamzah is my mom's right hand, which I don't disagree with.

When we invite family and friends over, my mom is usually not done cooking in time. That's when Hamzah comes in. Yes he does greet people when they come inside, play with his friends, and play with my friends and I, but most importantly, he is always there when my mom needs him.

Now I am writing about how he is my small hero, so let's get to me and his bond. Hamzah is a great brother that does hit me and annoy me, but in a brotherly way. He is always there for me no matter what. He guided me a long way through my school spelling, and my regional spelling bee which I got 8th place in.

That was a big stage of my life when I cut lots of bad habits out of my life thanks to the inspiration from my family, especially from Hamzah. Now I might be going into middle school at the age of 9 thanks to all he taught me throughout my life.

Hamzah is a big part of the family as well. He actually just finished his freshman year of college, after going to Middleton for highschool. When we go to sleep he goes with his friends and plays cricket or pickleball. But, he doesn't sneak out, because my parents know about it.

He does sometimes make bad mistakes like lying, but it's probably once in a blue moon. He is overall a good person and never denies our religion and always does what he is supposed to do.

But, he is very responsible. We honestly never thought that he was a responsible teenager. We learned that because he lived on his own for college. He will always stand up for anyone in my family and make us stop our bad habits. As you can see, Hamzah is a great brother. Which is why I chose him as my small hero in this story. Thank you for reading and giving me an opportunity to compete in this contest. Thank you all!



The Girl Who Changed Everything

by Annika Reinke, age 10

There once was a time when no one was happy. The world was very sad, and the world had no meaning. This was because it was always very stormy with thunder and lightning. Soon there was a girl who changed everything.

She wanted everyone to be happy, but the villagers disagreed. So the girl went to the mayor and said “no one in your town is happy, and that needs to be changed”. “No it doesn’t, if you want it changed, then you do it” said the mayor. He didn’t care enough about the town’s people. She did. She advocated for the town because she wanted change.

The next morning, she snuck into the mayor’s office to do the daily morning announcements.

“Good morning fellow citizens, we need change. We all know that no one is happy and I want us to be happy,” said the girl. “Hey, you are not the mayor! I am going to call the cops!” said a person from the town. Even with cops watching, she still persevered. Every day in the announcements she gave the townspeople compliments and ways to spread kindness.

She got caught by the mayor many mornings but she never gave up. Every time she got a bit stronger. Over time people started to agree with her, so they protested to the people who didn’t agree. Day after day she protested and more people spread kindness except not the mayor. One morning she woke up to a pounding on the door. It was the mayor with a notice that said “If you keep protesting you will get expelled from our town”. She ignored it, because she wouldn’t stop until everyone felt some happiness.

Suddenly it was just the Mayor vs the whole entire town. So some people from the town, including the girl, went to a judge. “We only want people to be happy. If they are happy, they will want to live here. With kindness and happiness, we will have a good community. Then the people who work for companies that fix buildings will build grocery stores and shopping centers then people will be able to live here peacefully” said the girl. Then it was the mayor’s turn “Um... they don’t need to be happy” said the mayor. “Villagers win!” said the judge. So the mayor was fired and got sent to jail and now the girl that changed everything became the mayor. The town had a big celebration. The girl who changed everything will always be recognized from now on as helping the town become happy and kind.

The end



Celebrating Small Heroes

by Amir, age 9

Celebrating small heroes is a beautiful acknowledgment of the unsung champions among us. These heroes may not grace headlines or receive grand accolades, but their impact is profound nonetheless. They are the caregivers who tirelessly tend to the needs of loved ones, the volunteers who selflessly dedicate their time to their communities, and the everyday individuals who extend kindness in the simplest yet most meaningful ways.

Whether it's a neighbor checking in on an elderly resident, a teacher going the extra mile to inspire a student, or a frontline worker diligently serving their community, these small heroes embody the spirit of compassion, resilience, and generosity. Their actions ripple through society, igniting hope, spreading positivity, and fostering a sense of unity and connection.

In celebrating these small heroes, we not only honor their contributions but also amplify the values they represent. Their acts of kindness remind us of the power we each hold to make a difference, no matter how small our actions may seem. It's a reminder to look beyond the spotlight and recognize the everyday acts of heroism that shape our world for the better.

So here's to the small heroes among us - may their deeds inspire us to cultivate kindness, empathy, and solidarity in our own lives, and may their impact continue to illuminate the path towards a brighter, more compassionate future.

Back To Back

by Sally Bajo, age 10

Once there was a girl named Aniyah who loved art. One day, during class, her class teacher, Ms. Jane introduced a new student named Jennifer. "Hi," She mumbled.

During art, while Aniyah was painting a rose, Jennifer walked by her, looked at the painting, and gave a disgusted look. She said, "I could do better." Oh, Aniyah thought, is she being rude to me?

"Okay class," Ms. Rose said. "We have 10 more minutes of class. Don't rush!" Aniyah's watercolor rose was turning out great! All she had left was the background and she was done.

When the class got back to the classroom for snack, Aniyah Took sliced apples and oreos. Next to her, Jennifer pulled out Dunkaroos and a juicebox. She looked at Aniyah's snack and snickered. "My snack is way better than yours." "Whatever." Aniyah muttered.

"Okay class," Ms. Jane said. "Bring out your writing notebooks and share your finished story with the person next to you. Aniyah, You'll be sharing your story with Jennifer."

Seriously? Aniyah thought, do I HAVE to work with her? Man, I need to talk this out with Destiny at recess. Aniyah sighed. She took her paper and gave it to Jennifer. "Here, read it. I don't want or need any mean comments. I've had a bad day from you already." "Whatever," Jennifer said. She began to read her story.

In the middle of reading the story, Jennifer pointed at a word and said, " You spelt there wrong, it's t.h.e.r.e. Not t.h.e.i.r." "Actually, you're wrong. It is T.H.E.I.R. because i'm talking about people, the T.H.E.R.E spelling is for when you're talking about places." Aniyah said. "You just don't wanna admit you're wrong!" Jennifer yelled. "Actually, it's the other way around. You just like saying that you're better than me." Aniyah said calmly but annoyed.

"Girls, Girls. Jennifer why are you yelling? Did Aniyah do something to you?" Ms. Jane said. "Uh, yeah! She is telling me I'm doing something wrong! And I know I did NOT do anything wrong!" Jennifer yelled. "What did Aniyah say you were wrong about?" "She said that she did not spell their in the wrong context and I told her that she DID!" Jennifer shrieked.

"Let me see," Ms. Jane said. Jennifer shoved the paper into her hands. Ms. Jane gave her a look to calm down. Jennifer pointed at the word, "That's what I'm talking about," Jennifer said, "That one right there."

"Actually," Ms. Jane said, "Aniyah did get this right. So, I confirmed who was right. Now, continue without any fights. Okay, Jennifer?" Ms. Jane Raised an eyebrow at her.



“Yes, Ms. Jane,” Jennifer said. I doubt she’ll listen. Aniyah thought, Because knowing her today, in the next three minutes she’ll be complaining that I was wrong about something else that I was right about.

Jennifer picked up the paper and her eyeballs flew across the page. Then she handed it back to Aniyah. “Here,” Then she tried to take it back but Aniyah’s hands had a firm grip on the paper. “Now what do you want to do? Let me guess, try to prove me wrong by erasing one of the words and proving me wrong? Well that’s not happening because I traced all the words in pen.” Aniyah whispered. “W-w How did you-No wa-” Jennifer stuttered. “I knew it.” Aniyah said. Jennifer began to tug harder and harder until...

The entire paper ripped in half. Aniyah gasped in horror. “Omigosh. Jennifer, That is my best story written that you destroyed right there.” She said. Jennifer smirked, “I did it on purpose, “ “WHAT!!” Aniyah screamed. “What is up with all the screaming today girls?!” Ms. Jane said as she walked over. “Jennifer ripped my paper. And she said she did it ON PURPOSE!” Aniyah cried.

Tears were forming in her eyes. “AND NOT TO MENTION, Jennifer on her very first day, has been mean to me by saying her art is better than mine, Her snack is better than mine, Saying I was wrong without confirming it first, and now, RIPPING MY BEST STORY ON PURPOSE”

Ms. Jane rubbed Aniyah’s back and went to her desk, picked up the phone, dialed a number, The girls overheard her say, “Hello, Yes, this is Ms. Jane, um yes, I need behavior support for Jennifer clemson in room 167 please. She is bullying Aniyah and she’s very upset right now... Okay, thank you.” When Ms. Jane put the phone down, Jennifer ran to a corner of the room and hid.

Aniyah had her head buried in her knees and was crying, kids kept looking at them and Ms. Jane had to keep telling them to continue working with their partners.

10 minutes later, The school counselor, Ms. Dior and one of the behavior support staff, Mr. Johnson, peeked in. “We need Aniyah and Jennifer please.” Jennifer tucked tighter into the corner.

“I can see you Jennifer.” Ms. Dior said. She turned to look at Aniyah. “Aniyah, You can stay here for a bit. We need to talk to Jennifer 2 on 1, Kay?” Aniyah nodded her head. Jennifer finally came out. And about 5 minutes later, Ms. Dior came back and called Aniyah to her office. “Jennifer’s with Mr. Johnson but I heard Jennifer’s side of the story and she said that you were mean to her first and it went back and forth. Is that true?”

“No, That’s not true,” Aniyah said. “She’s lying to get out of trouble. I bet she left out the fact that she had said her art and snack is better than mine, said I was wrong about something I didn’t do, and ripped my best writing piece in half.”

“Oh,” Ms. Dior said. “Now that I have both sides of the story, I’m going to talk to your teacher to catch up with her, And you can go back to your classroom.”

By the time Aniyah got back to the classroom, The class was doing reading. “Welcome back aniyah.” Ms. Jane said. “You can grab a book and go read. Aniyah grabbed a book and Sat at her spot and read.

Then, about another 10 minutes later, Jennifer walked into the room and handed Aniyah a paper. "Jennifer, Switch spots with keisha. I don't want you being mean to anybody or your going to principal Anderson's office for the rest of the day, you hear me?" Ms. Jane said. Jennifer nodded her head. "Yes Ms. Jane. And I mean it this time." "For sure?" ms. Jane asked. "For Sure." Jennifer said.

Aniyah opened up the paper. On the front it said "I'm Sorry" And inside it read:

*Aniyah,
I'm sorry for being mean to you. It's because in my old school I was bullied a lot and I didn't want to be the only one who was bullied before. I Promise to make it up to you in any way possible, and I hope you understand and forgive me.
-Sincerely, Jennifer*

Aniyah grabbed a piece of paper and a pencil and wrote:

*Dear Jennifer,
I don't know yet if i'm ready to forgive you yet. Also, you went a little too far when you said you would do anything to pay me back. You don't need to do that. But I don't mind too much. All I need from you is to stop being mean To me forever. And you were mean to me On your first day of school so It might Take me a bit to forgive you. Hope u understand.
-Aniyah*

She folded it and passed it through the class to Jennifer. Jennifer read it and sighed of relief. She felt like she had a million bricks taken off her shoulders. At recess, Aniyah was about to go talk to Destiny about what happened when Jennifer came and told her to talk in private. They went to a nearby tree. "What do you want?" Aniyah asked.

"I'm sorry about today," Jennifer said. "As I said in my letter, I was bullied in my old school and was made fun of for no reason but they always found a way to bring me down even when I did everything I could to look cool. I never stood up to them because I never knew how. So I wondered why they would bully me so moving to a new school was my opportunity and you just happened to sit next to me so you were my easiest target. And when I started doing it, it got rid of all the stress I had in my old school of being bullied."

"But now I realize that what I was doing was wrong, and that you might start bullying to relieve your stress or spend a lot of your time being miserable. And I'm REALLY, REALLY, REALLY sorry for being rude to you. And like you said in the letter, You might take a bit to forgive me but I hope you do." Jennifer was going back and forth on her heels and had her hands behind her back.

"Look I-" Aniyah stuttered. "After what you said, I can see why you were being mean to me because one of my best friends started bullying someone before, but fortunately, I was able to talk her out of it once I learned and were still friends with her but- let me just get to the point. I forgive you." She said. "Thanks, I was scared that you might not forgive me." Jennifer said.

As Aniyah was running to Destiny, Jennifer stopped her. "Wait!" She called out to Aniyah. Aniyah ran back to Jennifer. "Can we be friends now?" Jennifer asked. "Sure. I can introduce you to my friend Destiny." Aniyah said. Jennifer took the biggest sigh ever. Glad that's over, She thought. I'm glad we worked this out.

ANXIETY

by Sebastian Cao, age 10

It all felt like one cold, dark, and scary dream.

My anxiety was creeping in. I couldn't stop, it hurt until I arrived at my therapist's house. My therapist, Amanda Finch, has a family like me so sometimes she knows what I feel like. Some words she used to calm me down are "just try," "believe in yourself," and "think about the good times." I felt calm, brave, and strong. My anxiety went away.

One time I went to my friend's birthday party but when I got there, I felt my anxiety creeping in. I tried to hold it back but I couldn't. I needed help from my therapist. So after the party I went to my therapist's house and told her how the party went. She made me feel calm, my anxiety went away.



Anyway, I have to get home or my moms will kill me. When I get home the house usually looks pretty messy because my moms don't clean at all. When my moms get back home from work, I go right to them and hug them. When I hug them I feel warm, kind and calm. I also feel love. Now it's dinner time and my moms start to fight, that really gives me anxiety. I go upstairs to my bedroom and lie down in my bed and think about my moms not fighting. I think about all the happy times, like when we went to the Taylor Swift Eras Tour. We had so much fun there. Taylor Swift even gave me her 22 hat. She also said to me to be brave and that made me feel love, joy and peace. I go downstairs running, and when I get down I look at my mom and mom they also look at me we "all" start to laugh. I feel laughter, love, warmth and also a bit of anxiety worried about the future, but I forget about all of the bad times and start to think about the good times. My anxiety goes away, and I think maybe anxiety isn't that bad after all.

THE END

The Earth Day Cleanup

by Violet J. Hassler, age 10

On Saturday morning I woke up. I yawned and turned over to look at my calendar, then I said, "Yay! It's clean up day!" I quickly got up, got dressed in my explorers outfit, and raced downstairs. My mom was cooking breakfast and laughed. "Excited?"

"Yes!" I said. Just then my twin sister came downstairs rubbing her eyes. "Why are you excited? We're going to be picking up trash!"

"Ha, ha! You're joking! Right, Mom?"

"Cora's right, we're going to be picking up trash but it'll be fun! Right, Cora?"

"Sure," said Cora. "Fun."

"Oh.." I said,"I thought...never mind."

After that I only picked at my food and changed out of my explorers outfit and into my oldest t-shirt and ripped jeans. Finally it was time to drive over to the park.

"Hey Lyra, you okay?" Mom asked. I had been pretty quiet on the drive.

"Uh...yeah. Sure," I muttered.

"If you say so," Mom said doubtfully.

"I think Lyra's just upset that clean up day means you have to pick up trash," Cora said.

"Shut up!" I said.

"Lyra! Apologize to your sister!," snapped Mom. "Sorry" I said.

My mood didn't improve as we finished driving .At the clean up there were four boys. The boys were throwing trash at each other. "Oh boy," I sighed. "This is going to be a long day."

"Now let's get started," said the leader of the cleanup, Mary.

"Girls," said mom, "Why don't you go over to that patch of trees. I'll go over here."



“Okay...” said me and Cora. The boys followed us to the trees and tried to throw trash at us.” stop it!” We said. Finally after a half an hour their mom called them over and finally we could focus on picking up trash.

“Hey Lyra...why don't we do a contest to see who can pick up the most trash,” said Cora.

“Yay!” I said. “That's a fun idea!”

“I have three pieces,” said Cora.

“I have 2 pieces,” I said. I'm going to win! I thought. As I picked up trash I counted out loud, “3, 5, 16, 18, 22, 23, 29,” I counted.

“4, 5, 6 10, 12, 20, 28...” Cora counted.

“First one to get 40 pieces wins!” I said. “30, 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 39, 41...” I counted.

“29, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 39,” Cora counted. “Oh...you win.”

“Yes!” I cheered. “Now let's pretend we're miners looking for gems!”

“Okay,” said Cora. “I found a ruby,” said Cora holding up a kit kat wrapper.

“I found an emerald,” I said holding up a sprite can.

After a while our mom came over to tell us it was time to go home. “So Lyra. What did you like about it?” Mom asked.

“Well, I pretended the trash was jewels and I was a miner,” I said.

“That's stupid,” Cora grumbled.

“Cora apologize.” Said mom.

“Sorry Lyra...” said Cora.

“Good,” said mom. “What is wrong with you today?”

“She's just upset that I won our competition.”

“What competition?” Mom asked.

“Me and Cora had been trying to be the one to collect the most trash.”

”I also found a toy My Little Pony that someone lost.” said Cora.

“I wonder what treasures We'll find next year?” I said.

With Every Stone

by Olivia Grace Lubcke, age 10

The wet sand felt cold beneath my toes, sea foam crashed up against the shore, turning the blue water a shade of white. Calmly waiting, standing on the lake shoreline, waiting for the moment.

It was a warm, Saturday afternoon when my parents took me to the park. We had a picnic, food salty and sweet with lemonade on the side. But that night, a tornado hit, destroying the park and pulling up the grass. But I think it hit me worse. I had thrown a bottle into the recycling bin, and I was so terrified that it had blown into the lake, along with everything else, that the next day, I dragged my parents to the shoreline by the crazy thought that somehow the bottle had flown into the lake and was maybe, by some miracle, close to the shore.



Now, I calmly waited for the perfect moment, the moment when there would be a split in the water's edges so that I could dive in. Two minutes passed without the water losing any posture, but then, I saw a clear blue outline, a misfit in the crowd of white foam. I dove in, holding my breath before submerging into a backstroke, then turning over to swim smoother. The water pushed and pulled, but I stayed strong and pushed even harder against it, outracing the forceful waves of splashing water.

Once the waves were behind me, smooth, cool water splashed my face and slippery seaweed weaved through my toes. Calm water was just what I needed. Once I was used to the bubbles popping rhythmically and the sound of sea birds chirping happily, I dove under. It was horrid. Muck and gunk coated the lake bottom while bowfins and sea lampreys churned up the sand and seaweed, creating clouds of dust and sand that were impossible to see through. All that remained of the water above were the bubbles, but even they looked like they were filled with mud and dust. I quickly took my head out, scared that the sea lampreys would eat my hair, and returned to the light sound of splashing waves in the distance.

I had been swimming for a bit when I decided to look back. When I did, I realized that I was only about 200 yards away from the shore, so I decided to go back a bit and search the shoreline on the other side of the big rocks that separate the shore from the docks. I swam a loop around the rocks, touching their intricate divots and mats of seaweed, only to be met by the seagull nests that sit on the top spots of the rocks. Once on the other side, I swam under the docks, the most dreaded spots on the whole shoreline. Lines of sharp rocks appeared in every direction, flies buzzed around my head as I stared at the wilting cattails all around me. Rotting logs drifted to a stop when they hit the

posts that kept the dock standing. I wanted to swim through the spot as fast as I could, but I knew that the bottle could be in there. I searched quickly but didn't see it. I was about to head farther when I saw a shard of glass sticking out the side of two wet rocks. It glistened in the light, but no light was visible under the dock. I looked closer to see that a piece of garbage was making the glass sparkle, one way off in the distance.

I sucked in a breath and dove under, still appalled by the horror underneath. I swam faster than I ever had before, churning up the water and getting sand stuck in the seaweed strands. The rhythmic bubbles popped out of cue as I sped past them, scattering the seagulls out of line as I did so. I reached for the plastic bottle with my hand, grabbing its cold, wet outside. The liner was wrinkled and the cap had seaweed stuck to it, but it was definitely the same bottle I threw away before the tornado.

I put it in my hand and rushed back to shore. The sand crinkled between my toes as I walked to the recycling bin and threw it in with glee.

"So, sweetie, what did you do today?" my mother asked me as I sat back down on my towel.

"I stopped the ripple," I said.

With every stone, a ripple follows.

The Jedi Path

by Lola Mckenna, age 10

Clover's dream was to become a Jedi knight. She was already a Jedi padawan; her master was Ivy. And the first big step to becoming a Jedi knight was earning her padawan beads. But to earn her beads she had to build her lightsaber. To do that, she had to go into one of the most ancient Jedi temples and find her kyber crystal.



She was going into the temple with five other padawans, Willow, James, Lucas, Ava and Mia. But here's the thing master yoda said, "Small amount of time you have. The door freezes, it does, broken it cannot be." The friends walked into the temple.

"We should split up into smaller groups. Me and Clover can go together" said Ava. "Let's go, we don't want to get stuck inside of this temple!"

"Let's do it!" answered Willow.

Then Willow, Mia and James went through one doorway and Clover, Lucas and Ava went into a different one. "Race you!" Shouted Lucas, and he ran off.

"You go that way, I'll go this way. We'll meet up when we find our kyber crystals." Ava said.

"Ok," said Clover. Then the two friends went opposite ways. The inside of the temple where all of the kyber crystals are looks like a cave. The passageways are made out of stone with no light except the torches in their hands. Clover started to look for her crystal as fast as she could. As she was walking, she tripped on a loose stone and dropped her torch. Everything went dark. Clover was scared. She started to feel the ground for her torch, but she couldn't find it. Then she saw a red light up ahead. The light got closer and closer until she could see Lucas's face in the torchlight. She stood up and realized Lucas was holding his kyber crystal.

Lucas noticed that Clover hasn't found hers yet. "You better hurry, you're running out of time." He warned. He offered her his torch and ran down the path.

Clover yelled. "Thank you!" After a little while of looking for her crystal, Clover had no luck. It seemed that she would never find it. And she was running out of time, in five minutes the door would seal. Suddenly, Clover heard Ava yelling "HELP" at the top of her lungs. Clover didn't know what to do. She could keep looking for her kyber crystal and probably find it or she could help Ava and probably not find it. Clover immediately turned around and ran towards the sound of Ava's voice.

She saw that Ava was trapped in a wall of ice. She realized that both sides of the passageway that Ava was in had frozen over. Clover tried to break the ice by hitting it with her hands, but she couldn't. Then she tried kicking it, but the ice was too thick. Nothing seemed to be working. Then, Clover had an idea. She looked around for a big rock. Then she found one, it was a foot long and very heavy. It was very hard to pick up. She told Ava to back up. Clover threw the rock as hard as she could. The ice cracked but didn't break. It took her three tries, then the ice wall shattered.

Ava jumped out and hugged Clover. She said, "Thank you for saving me! We have to hurry, the ice is going to freeze over and we won't be able to get out." Clover noticed that Ava had her kyber crystal, too. Ava bolted down the passageway toward the exit and slid under it just in time. Clover was about to follow when she noticed a blue light glowing under the snow where Ava had been. She dug up the snow and saw a glowing kyber crystal. She picked it up and realized that, for her to find it, she needed to help her friend.

Clover ran fast down the passageway toward the exit. She could see that the exit was frozen over, but she didn't stop. She kept running as hard as she could. Running right at it, she broke through the ice wall as easy as could be.

All of the padawans rejoiced, then they turned to Yoda. He was waiting outside the ice the whole time. They said to him, "We thought the ice wall was unbreakable!"

Yoda said, "Encouragement you needed." The padawans celebrated completing the next step on their journey to becoming Jedi Knights.

Michael's Time Story

by Savy Mittag, age 10

One day, there was a kid named Michael. And he was a true superhero. He may not look like a superhero, but inside he is. Every day, Michael saw a new kid named Sid who sat alone. And Michael's friends didn't like Sid. They always said, "Eww, look at him! Eww, what's he eating?" Michael didn't say anything, so he sat and just watched, feeling guilty as he just sat there. But one day, he chose to take action to sit by Sid, even if his friends wouldn't like him.

Michael's friends stared at him and they said behind his back, "Uh, why would he sit by this kid? That's gross." And as he heard that, Michael felt a little sad, so he chose to say, "Come and sit by me, and what's your name?"

"Oh, ok. Sid."

"Cool name."

Michael's friends didn't want to be rude in front of the teacher so they said, "Ok." They felt weird for some time and a little scared because they didn't know if Sid would be rude, but when they got to know him well enough, they really liked him. The group expanded in a matter of time, and they were really popular and kind. Everyone liked them.

You might not like somebody until you get to know them well enough. But you should get to know them, even if you feel like you don't want to know them. That kid who was alone, Sid, got treated kindly and spread that kindness and care for everyone and even love. He treated people like he wanted to be treated every day.

But one day there was a field trip. They went to Goodman Youth Farm. There were bees and their friend named James was allergic to bees.

So when he didn't know that they were going to the beehive, he got stung by a bee. That's when Sid and Michael heard the "Oww!" They didn't think about it, so they listened to the farmer. Then by the time they were in different groups, Michael and Sid couldn't see where James was, but when they heard the scream again, they ran and knew exactly what happened to James. They knew exactly what to do.

Everyone just stood there and watched, and most people didn't know what was going on, so they sat there. When the two kids asked for something, everyone ran and fought for it. When the ambulance came Sid, Michael, and James went to the hospital.



Sid and Michael sat and waited in the waiting room, and when they saw Michael, they rushed to him and hugged him really hard. At the end of the hug, they looked at him and they said, "Why is your face red?"

They all laughed because they already knew the answer to it and that's why it was funny. Sid and Michael got an award for helping James when there was an emergency. And when the others saw, they got jealous and a little mad, but the kids who didn't didn't feel as bad. For example, Michael's friends celebrated him and felt good but it's not always fun celebrating people's happiness because you want some too.

If it weren't for Michael and his courage, they wouldn't even be friends at all. When something good happens, just have fun if you can, because life never stays the same, but it can for a long time. But that's not the point of this. And the friends who just celebrated them and the friends who got the award, they appreciated that their friends made them happy for doing a good thing, and that is a kind thing to do. When you feel good for someone, everyone will get an award to them one day, and then they'll come to understand how unfair they were to them and they should be kind. They do not want people to say, "I want one! Give me one!" so they just stopped saying things like that because they do not want that to happen to them. When it got their turn, they felt pride and happiness, and Sid and Michael had joy too. And that's what I call a good story of happiness.

You should not ever feel jealous about somebody. Everyone's a hero too. And one day, you will be one at a point and you'll love the feeling. Police and firefighters are heroes too. Love your life the way it is.

Being a Hero

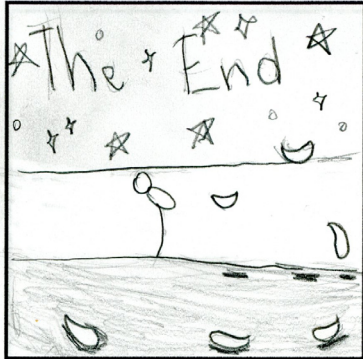
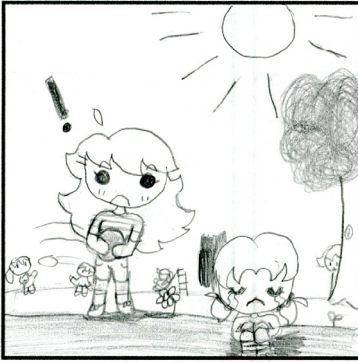
by Syd Richards, age 10

Being a hero
Can be as simple as
Cutting your neighbors grass
Or even taking out the trash
You could even be a hero by doing simple tasks
Cleaning up after yourself
Putting a book back on the shelf
You could pick up your dog's poo
I know its gross, but it's what we've got to do
You could even rake the the yard
Or just keep going when things are hard
Because
Being a hero
Does not involve following a trend
All you have to do is be a good friend



The Friend

by Maelynn Galley, age 11



Middles

Heroes

by Declan Ghaboussi, age 11

The heroes of life are not in comic books.

They are the policemen that deal with crooks.

They are the doctors fighting covid-19.

They are the army, air force, and marines.

They are engineers, making machines.

They are janitors, who make things clean.

They are scientists making vaccines.

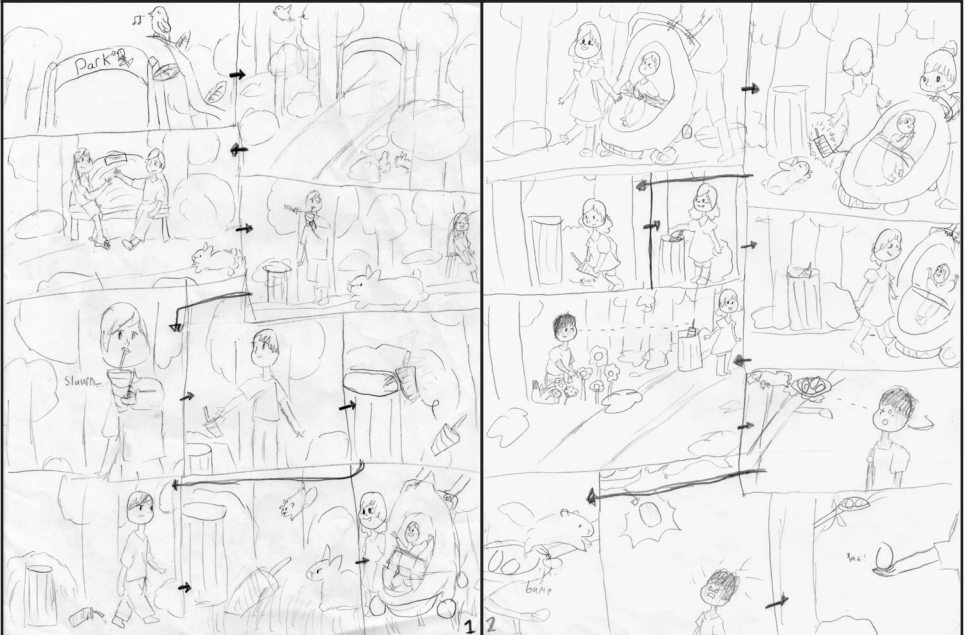
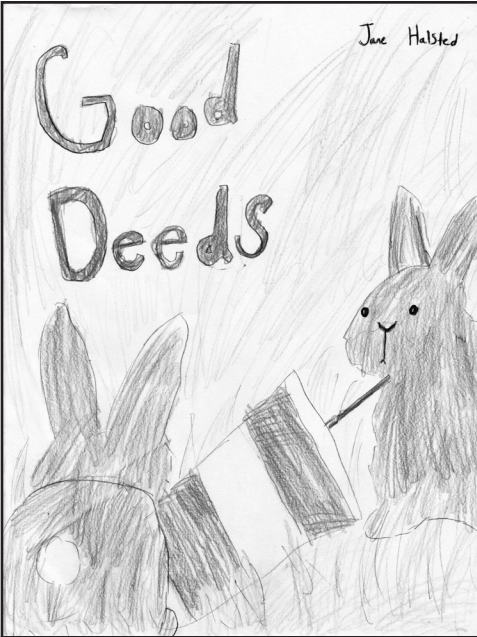
Firemen risking their lives on the scene.

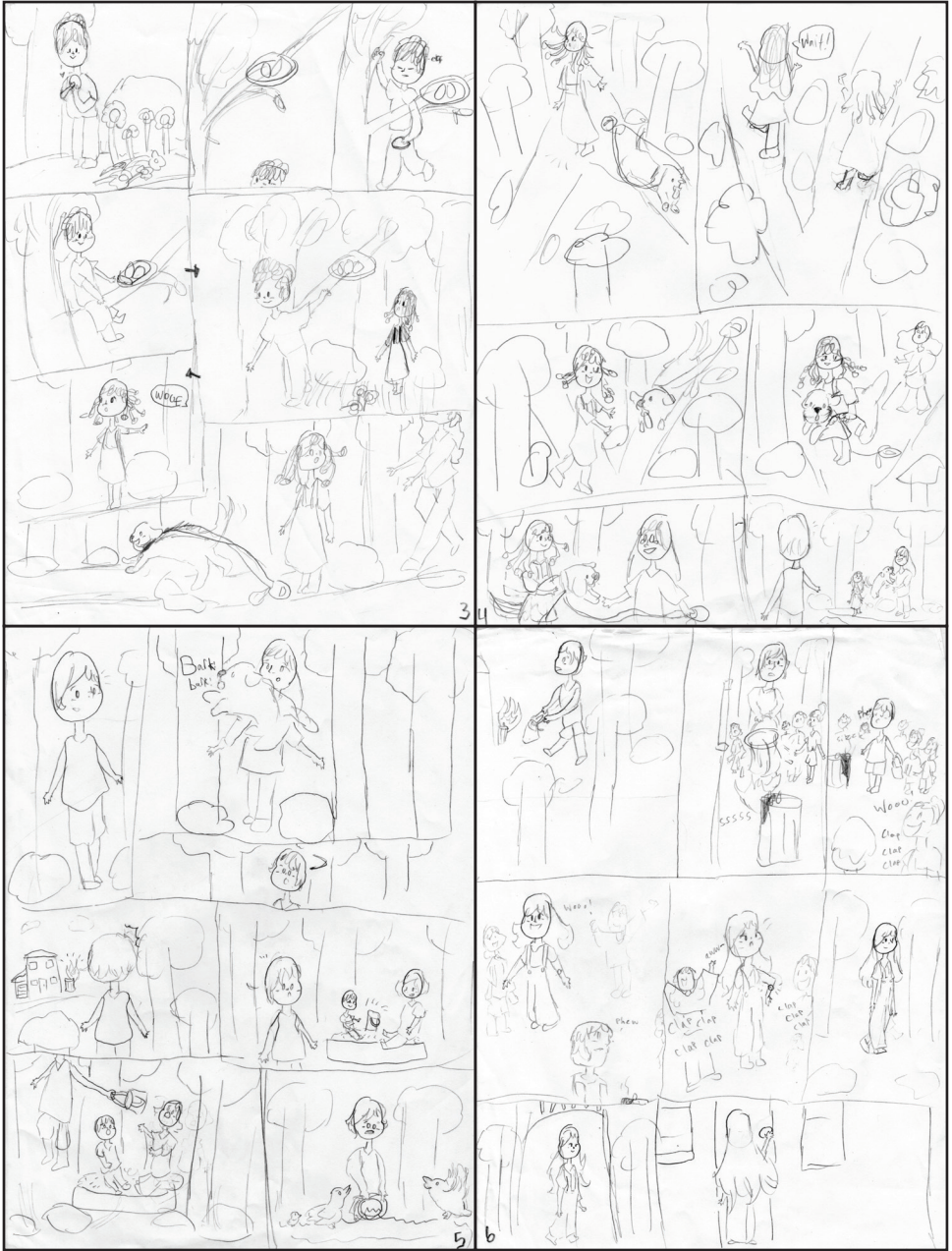
These are the unsung heroes to you and me

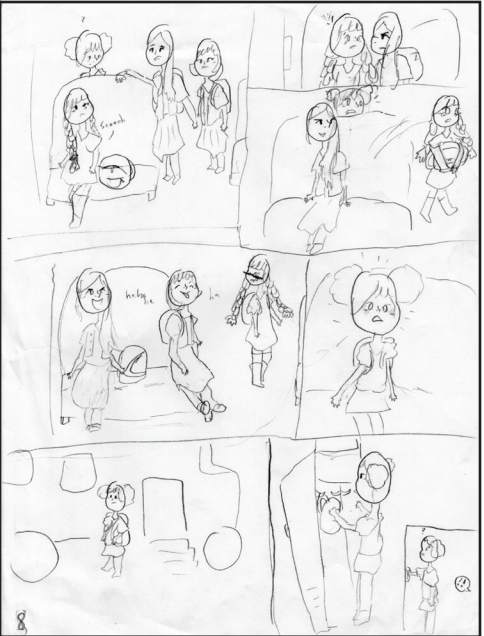


Good Deeds

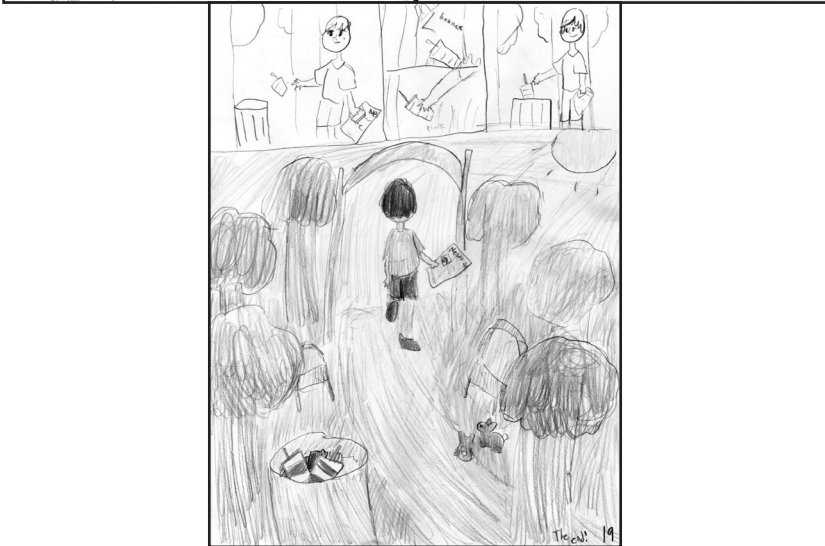
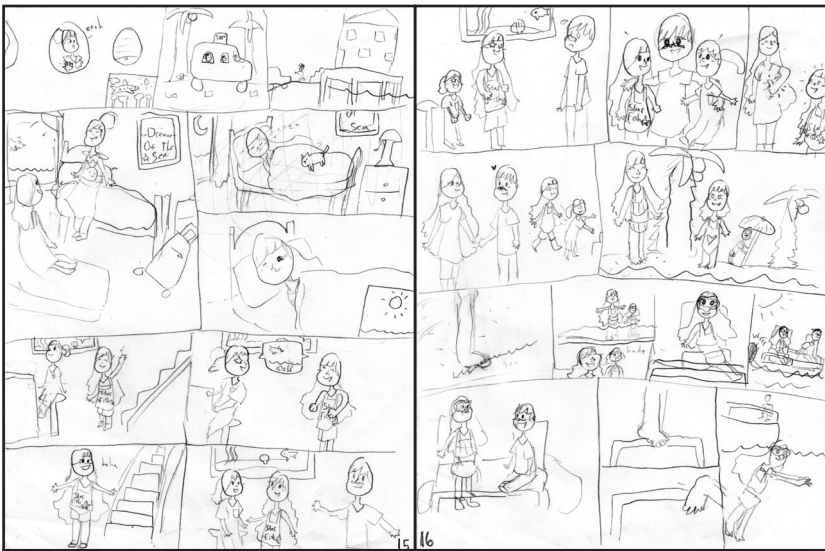
by Jane Halsted, age 11











The Only One

by Maddy Pierce, age 11

“Class, sit down now,” says my teacher. My name is Sana, and I’m 11 years old. Today in class, my teacher says we’re studying ‘Nature’s Heroes’. In a few weeks, we’ll need to write an essay on the subject.

“Mrs. Thorn?” says a student named Pepper.

“Yes, Pepper,” says my teacher.

“What creatures exactly are we studying today?”

“A few of the most important creatures on the planet,” says Mrs. Thorn. She pushes her purple glasses up her bony nose. She puts a strand of her jet-black hair behind her ear. “Okay, class. Settle down now,” she says. The bustling noise of the classroom slowly quiets, until it stops completely. “We have three options of creatures you can study today. Lizards, Snakes, and... Bees,” she says.



“Bees?” says one kid.

“Yes,” says Mrs. Thorn.

“But, don’t all bees do is sting you and make honey? And, FYI, honey is bee spit, so I don’t eat it anymore,” said Asher. He’s the class know-it-all. Personally, I think honey is good whether it’s spit or not.

“Asher, raise your hand before you speak,” says Mrs. Thorn. “Now, choose which animal you’d like. Raise your hand for Lizards.” Half the class raises their hands. “Snakes.” The other half raises their hands. “Bees?” she asks. I raise my hand.

“Am I, the only one?”

“Lizards, go to Mr. Leo’s class. Snakes, go to Ms. Clarissa’s class.” says Mrs. Thorn. I wait. And wait. And wait some more. But nobody showed up in Mrs. Thorn’s class.

“Is anybody else doing bees?” I ask?

“I hope so,” says Mrs. Thorn sadly. “On that note, let’s start! Okay, tell me one fact you know about bees.”

“Well, I know bees pollinate flowers and plants. But I’m not sure how that makes them one of the ‘Heroes of Nature’” I say.

“Well, Sana, the first lesson is about the important roles bees play in keeping our ecosystem together.” And then, the lesson started.

Mrs. Thorn told me all about how important pollination is, and the pollinators. Bees were one of the major pollinators. I learned why bees sting, and what happens when they do, and how to avoid being stung.

At the end of the day, I got up from my chair.

“Thanks Mrs. Thorn, I’ll see you tomorrow!”

“Bye, Sana!” says Mrs. Thorn. I walk home after that, and go to bed. My head swimming with all that I’d learned today. Afterwards, I drifted off to sleep.

I wake up inside a dream. It looked like my house and neighborhood, but something was off. I look down at myself, and realize I’m VERY skinny. My stomach growls. Waiting for just a little crumb of food to digest. I stand up, and my legs shake under my weight. I take one step, and fall. I decided to crawl, instead of walk. I crawled to my door. I lift a frail hand, and open it. I crawl downstairs, and manage to sit at the table. I see the news headline. It reads:

“Have Bees Gone EXTINCT?”

My heart almost stops. I think. Food is gone. All food starts with plants in some way. And all plants need bees. I wipe the beads of sweat off my forehead. 80% of the Earth’s pollinators are gone.

I woke up with beads of sweat on my forehead and face. There has to be something I can do about this!

10 years later...

I walk through the streets of Los Angeles, California. Posters are everywhere. And not different posters, the same ones. ‘Meet Sana G Mayana, savior of bees.’

“Hello, Sana,” says a voice. It was because of this person that I’d worked so hard to save the bees. They’d helped me spread the idea that the world would shrivel up and die without bees. That we needed bees! I heard a familiar buzz fly by my head, I turned and saw a bee land on a flower.

“Hey little guy,” I say. The bee flies away with pollen on its feet. The person with me waves their wrinkled hand. Her graying hair is swept into a bun. They push their purple glasses up their bony nose. “Thank you,” I say to them.

“Oh, Sana,” they say.

“Thank you, Mrs. Thorn.”

“Wanna know my next lesson plan?” she asked.

“What?” I say.

“Bees, Tardigrades, and Snakes,” she says.

“Still snakes?” I complain.

“Still snakes,” she says.

“Never underestimate the small ones,” I say.

“That, my friend, is a very true statement.”

The End

Celebrating A Small Hero

by Sofia Real, age 11

Early life

On April 4th 1959, a baby boy was born in a small city in Wisconsin, the 3rd of what was to be 6 kids. He was born to help in any way possible. At the age of 12 he was inspired to become a firefighter after seeing them fight a fire across from his house. He didn't know if he was cut out to be a firefighter, he didn't know if he was big or strong enough but it became his dream. He worked as an electrician until 1988 when he decided to try out being a part-time firefighter. It wasn't what he thought it would be, by the time he got to the scene of a fire it was dealt with, which was disappointing for him. After 5 years he did a test to be a full-time firefighter but didn't do so well. He studied super hard during the next year and did the test again and got the highest score.



Firefighting

He helped in so many ways during his 25 years of being a firefighter. He was part of dive rescue and hazmat teams. He also helped promote smoke and carbon monoxide detectors to reduce deaths. He risked his life many times but somehow managed to always stay calm to not scare anyone. During one fire he and a fellow firefighter stayed all night to watch a fire that kept relighting until morning when the bulldozer came and tore the building down. Another time, there was a truck carrying gasoline and the gasoline spilled on the freeway. He and other firefighters had to spray foam to prevent fire. The truck's lights were still on so the Chief said he had to crawl under to cut the battery cables. It was a dangerous task, because the electricity could ignite the gas. He wasn't afraid so he did it. When he cut the cables there were sparks and his clothes were ruined but luckily the gas did not ignite.

Later in his career he did a test to become a fire truck driver and operator. He studied hard and got the highest score. It was fun for him, but he really wanted to be a lieutenant to be able to go to fires and be the boss of the fire and the station. And what do you know? Two years later he did the test and got promoted. During his career he was mainly a lieutenant as well as the stand-in chief when the Chief was not present. He had to be the stand-in chief at a fire a whopping 12 times. He asked and didn't order which made him very well respected by others.

A different fire was started by a couple who were trying their wedding candles and left without blowing them out. When the first fire engine got there they worked on evacuating the apartment. They claimed the fire was too hot so his crew took a hose line and went in. They started putting the fire out from the inside, not realizing the fire had spread to the attic. His radio wasn't working

and the Chief was trying to contact them to get them out. Eventually he went to the window to see what the Chief wanted and got out safely. Later that week a photo was in the newspaper of him in the window during the fire.

An additional thing he did was saving cats. One of those cats was in the apartment fire of the previous story. It went under the bed but luckily was saved. Another time there was a cat in a tree. When they brought the cat down the neighbors and family were extremely proud and brought them a cake the next day. The Chief wasn't happy and told him they shouldn't save cats because the public wouldn't agree but he didn't care. He told the Chief that they were to save all lives and property because all lives are important.

Aftermath

After his retirement there was a meowing outside. The third day he went to investigate and found a cat in a tree. He got his ladder and got the cat down because even though he wasn't a firefighter, he still liked to help. That cat now comes to visit often. That's the firefighting career of Mike W. With all the lives he impacted throughout his career he is a perfect example of a small hero to celebrate.

Actions Speak

by Kathryn Sayles, age 11

A little dog whines, shivering through the cold streets of Wisconsin. She knows this place like the back of her hand. The rich people's huge mansions, the middle class people's cozy houses, the poor people's apartments (which were plentiful). She knew the big blue house where the kind old lady used to give her scraps.

But one day, there were new people in the house. They were cruel, mean people who shooed her away with a broom.

The dog whimpers because yesterday, when she checked again for the old lady, the nasty humans had shot her with a gun in the leg. She had cried out in pain, but no one heard her. No one cared.



She curled up into a ball on the side of the building, ready to give up and bleed out. She was almost asleep when a familiar voice grew closer.

“Yes, dear. This is where I grew up, and I am so happy to be back! There was this sweet, odd little dog who I used to feed. I feel so terrible, not giving her to the shelter. Well, we'd better head back hoAHHHHH!” For the kind old lady who used to feed the little dog was back, in the flesh, and had just found her little friend.

She picked the little dog up, and the other human who was there with the little dog's friend started tapping frantically on her phone.

“Hello? Dane County Humane Society? We have an injured, stray dog... No... Yes. Right away.” They jumped into the car, the kind old lady still holding the little dog tight, and drove away.

When the car stops, the kind old lady hands the little dog over to some guy.

“Thank you. This dog'll be in good hands.” They led her away from the kind old lady, and into a building.

The little dog is not familiar with this building. She starts to cry out, but then the pain swells into a roaring crescendo and she blacks out.

She wakes up briefly, to see even MORE unfamiliar humans. They cover her mouth with something plastic-y, and she blacks out once more.

When she wakes up, she hurts all over and her leg is gone. They take her to a room. Then they do another surgery. Then they take her to another room. After that, they do an examination.

"A puppy... looks like some kind of German Shepherd mix. Let's call her Milly." She is taken to another room, but her kennel is bigger. She checks out her space. It is nice and cozy. Maybe these humans are her friends, like the old lady, and not her enemies, like the mean couple. She decides that beards are scary. That guy with the beard shot her.

She lies down on a blanket, and falls asleep to nightmares of gunshots and brooms.

Three weeks later

Two women walk into the dog area. "Which one is it again, babe?"

"Kennel 3, I think." They walk over to the little dog's kennel. The women bend over.

"Yup, Milly. Good job, babe! ...Now, what should we name her?"

"I'm thinking... Penny?"

"Perfect!" The woman who spoke first lifts the little dog up. "My little Penny."

Three months later

It took a while for the women to adopt Penny, and it took a while for her to learn her adopter's names, but the one with warm cinnamon skin's name is Betty, and the one with pale skin and pretty crescent eyes name is Lilly.

It is now something humans call 'christmas.' A bunch of new people arrive. She growls at one with a beard who looks like the person who shot her, but other than that she is very friendly.

Finally, the last guest arrives. "Mom! It's good to see you!" Betty cries out as she rushes over to the door. And Penny sees...

The person who kept her alive.

The person who kept her happy.

The person tied with Betty and Lilly for ultimate ruler of her heart.

She sees the kind old woman who fed her when she was a stray.

She runs to the door, barking with joy, and the woman winks and pulls out a big treat.

She leans down and says, "I am so happy to see you, Penny. So happy."

Help

by Millicent Vieau, age 11

One day
A little girl she fell
Another one helped her right up
And she was all okay

Then the next day
The little girl who fell
She remembered how good it felt
To be helped by someone else

She saw somebody crying
Crying out their eyes
She went over and check on them
And they were all right

It felt so good to help them
Help them as she did
But she can't do it all herself
She must admit

She needs your help



Listen to the audio
of this song here.

Mory to the Rescue

by Isaiah Huegerich, age 11

One day a mail man named Mory was delivering his mail from tree to tree like most mushrooms do when he came upon an especially wilted tree named Oaky. He went up to Oaky and asked why he looked so wilted.

"I can't get any water because I gave most of it away to my dying old grandmother and it hasn't rained in days," Oaky answered.

"That's nice of you, would you like me to ask around and see if any one is willing to spare some water for a brave, willing young tree?" Mory asked. Oaky smiled and nodded thankfully, giving Mory a pail to collect water in.

"I better get back to work," Mory said to himself. He got back to work and asked whoever would listen if they had any water to spare for a young wilted tree that saved his grandmother's life. At first no one wanted to give away water from their water stores but soon people started giving drops. By the end of the day the bucket only barely had enough water to cover the bottom. Also Mory had found another wilted tree he had to care for. "Oh no," thought Mory. "This is not enough for even one young tree."

He went back to Oaky and said, "I'm so sorry Oaky but no one was very willing to help. "There's not enough water in this bucket to seep to your roots, do think you can make it till tomorrow after noon?"

Oaky replied, "I think so. I still haven't used my emergency water supply yet."

"Good" said Mory "I think you'll make it," but he really thought, poor Oaky, I don't know if you'll make it.

Then he started to go to the other wilted tree to see if he was in a better state than Oaky but decided that he better get to bed after this extra long work day. The next day Mory went straight to the other wilted tree he had found to ask her if she wanted him to collect water for her. She introduced herself as Maple and she said she definitely wanted him to collect water for her. Then he set out with another pail in hand and continued with his work. He found it was much easier to fill the buckets while he was delivering his mail and soon the buckets were full. Since the buckets were so heavy and he didn't want to lose any precious water, the mail deliveries were very slow. He decided to go and drop off the buckets of water at the young trees.



First he went to Oaky and found him near dead. Then he quickly poured the water and watched the young tree quickly transform into his original looking self. Oaky hugged Mory and thanked him gratefully. Then Mory quickly walked to maple and dumped the bucket and told her that he better get going. She thanked him politely and he got on with work. Soon he found many other wilty young trees and the adults were being more and more generous. His mail delivery business turned out to be more a water and mail delivery business rather than just a mail one. Soon the trees in the forest were not dying as much and everyone seemed happier. Way to go Mory!

The end

**In real life mushrooms are amazing heroes that send supplies from tree to tree underground with their amazing roots called mycelium made of a dense mass of tiny thread-like material called hyphae. Mushrooms can also store up to 70% of the carbon dioxide in the air around them into the soil!*

-Wikipedia, Paul Stamets, BBC

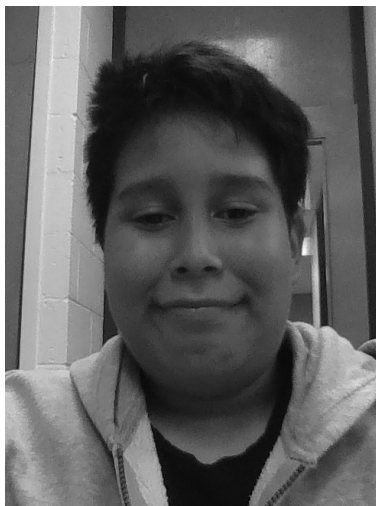
Celebrating Small Heroes: Recognizing Everyday Acts of Courage and Kindness

by Santos J Betanco Lopez, age 12

In a world often captivated by larger-than-life figures and dramatic narratives, it is essential to pause and celebrate the small heroes among us. These individuals may not make headlines or receive awards, but their actions embody the essence of courage, kindness, and selflessness.

Recognition of Everyday Acts

Celebrating small heroes involves acknowledging and appreciating the everyday acts of courage and kindness that often go unnoticed. It could be the neighbor who shovels snow from the sidewalks for elderly residents during winter, the teacher who stays late to help struggling students, or the volunteer who tirelessly supports a local community organization.



Importance of Acknowledgment By celebrating small heroes, we shine a light on the values and qualities that define true heroism. These individuals inspire others with their actions, demonstrating that everyone has the power to make a positive impact in their community, regardless of their circumstances or resources.

Cultivating a Culture of Appreciation

Creating a culture that celebrates small heroes encourages empathy, compassion, and civic engagement. It reinforces the idea that every contribution, no matter how small, is valuable and worthy of recognition. This, in turn, motivates others to emulate these acts of kindness and generosity.

Inspiring Future Generations

When we celebrate small heroes, we not only honor their contributions but also inspire future generations to follow their example. Children and young adults learn valuable lessons about empathy, resilience, and the importance of helping others, shaping them into responsible and compassionate citizens.

Strengthening Communities

Small heroes play a crucial role in strengthening the fabric of our communities. Their actions foster connections, build trust, and create a sense of belonging among residents. By celebrating their efforts, we promote unity and solidarity, contributing to a more supportive and inclusive society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, celebrating small heroes is about more than just recognizing individual acts of kindness or bravery. It is about honoring the values and qualities that unite us as humans — empathy, compassion, and a commitment to making a positive difference in the lives of others.

By highlighting and appreciating these everyday heroes, we contribute to a culture that values kindness and generosity, inspiring others to contribute to their communities.

Small Hero Acts: The Power of Everyday Courage and Kindness

Small hero acts are the quiet but powerful deeds that individuals perform daily, often without fanfare or expectation of recognition. These acts embody the essence of heroism, demonstrating courage, compassion, and selflessness in ordinary circumstances.

Examples of Small Hero Acts

Small hero acts come in various forms and contexts. It could be a stranger offering their seat on a crowded bus to someone in need, a child comforting a friend who is upset, or a volunteer spending their weekends cleaning up a local park. These actions may seem mundane on the surface, but they have profound impacts on individuals and communities.

Impact and Significance

The significance of small hero acts lies in their ability to uplift, support, and inspire others. They create ripple effects of positivity, fostering a sense of community and reinforcing the values of empathy and kindness. Small hero acts remind us that even the smallest gestures can make a meaningful difference in someone's life.

Characteristics of Small Heroes

Small heroes are characterized not by their fame or grand gestures but by their willingness to act with integrity and compassion. They possess empathy for others and a sense of responsibility toward their communities, motivating them to contribute positively to society.

Recognition and Appreciation

While small hero acts may go unnoticed by the wider world, it is essential to recognize and appreciate their significance. Celebrating these acts encourages others to emulate them, creating a culture of kindness and solidarity. It also validates the efforts of individuals who may not seek recognition but deserve acknowledgment for their contributions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, small hero acts remind us of the everyday heroism that exists within each of us. They demonstrate that heroism is not reserved for extraordinary circumstances or exceptional individuals but is accessible to everyone who chooses to act with kindness, courage, and empathy.

By celebrating small hero acts, we celebrate the values that bind us together as a society and inspire future generations to embrace these qualities in their own lives. Let us cherish and amplify the impact of these quiet heroes, for they embody the spirit of compassion and goodwill that enriches our communities and makes the world a better place.

Grains of Sand

by Iliana Shapiro, age 12

Not all heroes are born such. Most aren't, in fact. Those raised with the belief that they will be heroes no matter what they do end up doing twisted things believing they're right. Those told nothing they do will ever be heroic, they strive to do what they believe right. They change the world, for better or worse.

Then, there are the rest of us. Those told nothing, left to wonder. We, the vast majority, are as likely to hurt existence as we are to help it, but in truth, we're rather unlikely to do either. Existence is nearly untouched by us. We help instead, single beings, insignificant in the fullness of time and yet something nonetheless. We don't help generations of the future, or nations, or even cities, for the most part. We help people, here and now. Your best friend, your mother, your neighbor, or just people in passing, names left unlearned. The small things we do, meaningless to an outside observer, yet they bring smiles. The small things we do, meaningful to meaningless people, yet kind nonetheless. The small things we do, nothing but grains of sand, but enough grains of sand can build a beach. The small heroes of our universe, solar system, planet, country, city. We build up beaches, to be washed away slowly by the waves.



There will come a time when all of us will have been erased. Even if we evolve, survive the collapse of our sun, nothing is permanent. There will come a time when there is no one left to remember anything or anyone. Not New York, or Beijing, or Shakespeare, or Leonardo da Vinci, much less the incomprehensible builders of beaches. There will come a time, years and years and years from now, when no one will remember us. Yet we go along, building and painting and singing and helping and trying and quietly moving through, pushing through joys and sorrows and hardships, for it all to be erased.

This poses, as many things do, a question: Why? Why try at all, if it's all ultimately for nothing? Why help the new people next door move in when humans will be gone one day? Why paint a painting, no matter how beautiful, if it will be engulfed in flames at the collapse of our sun? Why sing, or dance, or play, if someday, no matter how well it's recorded, there will be no one left to appreciate it? Why should I be writing this when, most probably, no one will remember it next week, much less throughout infinity?

The answer, dear reader, is that not only memories matter. What you must remember is that the present, however small, matters just as much. The people next door won't live to see the year 2100, much less the collapse of our sun, or, much later, our universe. But they are here, now, and you can add another grain of sand to the evergrowing beach. Even if it is one day consumed by the

waves, sand is still sand on the ocean floor. Even if no one remembers it then, your neighbors will, now. That's why we live in the now. Why we push the big questions, the Whys, the Hows the What Ifs, to the back of our minds. It's why we don't think too far ahead. It's why we stare existence in its face and say "No one will remember me saying this, eventually. There will come a time when even I don't. But I do now. I know, now, that I am saying this, and that's what matters. I know, now, that this will be forgotten, and I don't care."

We don't know what awaits us after death. We can only guess. Do we move on, live life after life after life? Do we live for eternity in the blissful domain of our Deity? Is our consciousness erased, becoming nothing, a fleeting thing? These are all concepts, ideas, in the abstract. For eternity anything would be a burden, unbearable. That is why we don't question. Take life day after day after day, not thinking too far away, too far ahead. The smallest of the small can still be heroes, if just for a day, or an hour, a minute, a second. Just don't think about it. Do what's right without questioning, without asking for recognition. Do good, even though it won't be remembered. Like real people do. Like real heroes do.

Lily

by Cloe Zimmerman, age 12

I leap onto a lily pad, stumbling as it shifts under my weight. The movement feels like an earthquake, but I remain unfazed. A buzz—I spot movement in my peripheral vision. A fly. I eject my long, pink tongue and am rewarded with a delicious, crunchy snack. Soon after, while digesting my treat, I spot a glimpse of a hawk, one of a frog's greatest predators. The hawk is circling above, its keen eyes fixed on me. Hastily, I hop into the vibrant pink lily to my right, covering myself with its petals. Hidden and small, I wait. The hawk circles some more, then surrenders, returning to its nest. I will forever love my lily. It shields me from hungry predators, and I am forever in its debt.



Every day, I float alone in the water, my vibrant pink lily adorning me. A nearby frog catches my attention, and I hope for companionship. Miraculously, the frog leaps onto my lily, rocking us like a see-saw. If I had a stomach, this powerful sensation would have made me nauseous, but luckily, I don't. No longer lonely, I watch as a hawk approaches. Despising these creatures and afraid of them, too, I hold my breath. Thankfully, the frog hides in my lily's petals, and the hawk flies away, back to its nest, stomach empty. I marvel at my lily's beauty—the very essence of life on the water. I am grateful for my lily, it saved both me and the frog.

I fly around all day. I need to eat. In the process, I also need to pollinate. I fly from flower to flower, an exhausting, redundant pattern. One ordinary day, I flew, pollinated, and felt bored. But I kept going. Soon, I was tired. I flew over a pond and saw a field of vibrant pink water lilies. I loved water lilies. Their sweet nectar was hydrating and refreshing after a long day of work. I buzzed happily towards one and enjoyed the sweet taste, reminiscent of the fruits I ate from human homes. The sugary, syrupy water gave me new, replenished energy. I frantically zipped from one lily to another. As I approached another lily... smack! I was stuck on something pink and was moving through the air into a frog's mouth. Although you could argue that the lily caused my fretful demise, I am eternally grateful to the lily. I couldn't have dreamt of better last moments.

I wake up to the sound of chirping. My babies are hungry. I have to venture out to find food, like I do every day. I head to the pond. Might as well try my luck there. As I soar through the vast, blue sky with its fluffy clouds that remind me of my children's downy feathers, I see a frog on a lily pad. I love flying up there among the clouds. Yet again the clouds remind me of my children. My poor, hungry children. I know I had to try to get this frog, so I circle back. I circle again. Again and again. Getting lower with each pass. I try to hone in on the frog to dive, but the frog is nowhere to be seen. Something vibrant pink catches my eye. A water lily. I circle again and again, transfixed by its beauty. Like a deer in

headlights. I know my children are still hungry, so slowly, painfully, torturously, I take my gaze away from the lily and fly away. Even though I didn't get the frog, I still love that lily. Its beauty makes my flights worthwhile. It makes for a beautiful birds-eye-view, a hawks-eye-view. I will forever be inspired by the beauty of that lily.

I have seen so many things. Years come and go. Trees rise up from seeds. I have an important job. A job that I love. I get to be a water lily. This means something different for everything that I help. For the frog I am a place to hide. Company and protection for my lily pad. Food and fuel for the fly. And for the hawk, a spot of beauty. I love myself. I love my job. I love all.

Bigs

The Bus Driver

by Justin Bergman Irizarry, age 13

As was his quotidian, the bus driver smiled at the masses shuffling into the bus, mostly irritable, cantankerous New Yorkers. Oh, those inconsiderate loudmouths! Why had the bus driver left their family in Florida? But they still smiled, they would remind themselves maybe they're not showing it, but i'm helping them. also I'd rather not seem all inconsiderate-like these guys. Day after day the bus driver continued to divulge a grin. No matter how cranky, bad-tempered, or displeased the locals were, the bus driver continued to smile.

The man had got on the bus ready to take his life, he was going to ride to the nearest skyscraper and jump. Why shouldn't I? It's not like anybody was going to miss him, he was just another neglected passerby. Here was the bus, he climbed up the steps and looked up, the bus driver smiled at him. The grin was a beam of kindness in his dark life, for the first time the derelict man had felt special, cared for. The bus arrived at his stop, but he didn't leave. He waited until he got home instead, got up, and thanked the bus driver.



The bus driver saw a melancholy figure with hard features trudging into the bus aisle, the bus driver didn't want to seem like a kibitzer, but they smiled anyway, they smiled a smile that you're special, you matter, and I care about you. Something seemed to change in the man, but the bus driver couldn't say what though as the man had gone down the aisle quickly. After more smiling and more driving he saw the man return to the front of the bus, preparing to leave, he turned around "Thank you" he said, and he left. This was quite reassuring to the bus driver.

She stepped out of the bus stop, she stumbled, she was struggling to pick up her papers as the loveless people of New York continued their gait towards the bus. The woman was getting a divorce, she was done with her man, she had felt no love for him, and for her there was no other reason needed, she would leave him for a new, fresh experience, just like she had done with the four past men. She stepped onto the bus, pleased that she'll have a new bedmate soon. She looked up, the bus driver smiled at her. Just like my old husband, what a dope she allowed herself a small, silent chuckle. She suddenly felt guilty though Oh! What am I doing, he loved me, he really loved me! She gave the bus driver a small thank you, and stepped out of the bus, she walked to the nearest trash can and tore up her divorce papers, she continued home to give her husband a much deserved hug.

The bus driver had just greeted everybody entering the bus-with no gratitude in return for his efforts, as was the usual-and he saw a woman struggling to pick up some papers, he wanted to help, but he couldn't really leave the bus, as she got on he gave her a real smile, he was sorry for her. He heard a whispered "thank you" and she was off. The bus driver knew they were making a difference, and they would continue to change lives through smiles.

Grieving The Present

by Monona Faasuamalie, age 13

I don't think it's missing someone, it's grieving the present

When you grieve someone who isn't dead, your heart will break whenever you see them

Replaying all the memories between each other

Your heart drops and your hands get damp

Your stomach feels angry and your face gets hot and embarrassed, you're embarrassed because you know if they would let you that you would do it all again

You can't go back now, because you've already alienated yourself from them

The change was too fast for you

How can someone go from knowing everything about you to making you feel like hiding your face whenever they're around just based on the pure fear of messing up and further driving them away?

You'll both walk by without even looking each other in the eyes.

You know you wish things could've been different, and maybe they should've but it's over now

You start to write again

You use your writing to tell your cryptic messages to the world without revealing your secrets

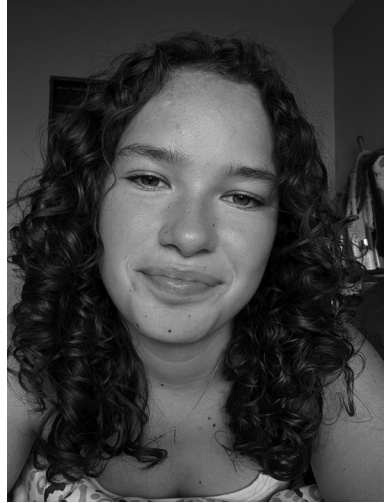
You channel all of your clandestine feelings into the verses of your poems, the sunsets of your painting and the characters of your stories

Your output of originality and vulnerability is your salvation from your concealed confusion and vexation

Your art is always there no matter who else is

It aids in the isolation that haunts you every day

Haunted by who you used to be and haunted by the fact that you spent so much time building your life around someone who couldn't even stick around



Maybe you don't miss the person that left, you miss the person that stayed.

The grief you're feeling will help you to become the person you were meant to be, the person that they couldn't ever let flourish

They never could because they knew if you grew to your full potential, the one that you're now striving for every day, that you would've realized that you deserved better than them

The grief isn't a bad thing, it's the thing that's helping you realize who you were meant to be and who you're supposed to be with

If that person couldn't stay, then it isn't them

Your grief can be your hero if you let it.

The Cities

by Maggie Hinterthuer, age 13

There lay a city beyond great mountains of waste, beyond forests of smoke, a gray wasteland; a splinter of life in an otherwise dead world.

Over this city was a weighted blanket of smog, endless pollution, shrouding the city in darkness.

Within this city was a house, concrete and steel, foggy windows which blocked any view, any view at all—of which there was none.

In this house slept a young girl, curled up in a rough, thin blanket, dreaming of how this place used to be – lush, green meadows, sprawling across the landscape, beaming up to a blue sky. Trees filled with colorful songbirds sway in the wind, and the yellow sun smiles down on them. The girl dances on a hill, twirling and laughing in a pink sundress. She plucks a single red rose from its plant, and delicately takes in its sweet perfume.



Such colors do not exist in her world, and she believes that the concept of them is but a figment of her imagination. She doesn't know the names of these colors. She doesn't know how she dreams of them.

Others don't see colors.

She does.

* * *

Hundreds of miles away, past a gray wasteland, past forests of smoke, past great mountains of waste, lay a city.

Over this city was a clear blue sky; seldom a brave cloud ventured into its vast expanses.

Within this city was a house, logs carefully slid into place to create a stable structure, crystal-clear windows making way for a breathtaking view of a forest of tall, lush pine trees swaying slowly in the wind.

In this house sat a young girl, staring out the window, her petite hands resting on the cool glass pane. There was an invasive thought curling around her mind, a black vine choking her consciousness, polluting the perfection of her world. But somewhere out there, she knew, things were not perfect. There was darkness. Darkness taking the form of death and destruction.

Others don't know of darkness.

She does.

* * *

"Don't be silly," they say, "there are no such things in this world." but the little girl in the darkened city believes that there are. Somewhere out there, there is a lush meadow just for her, flowers swaying in a gentle breeze. We're here, they seem to say, we're waiting.

"Don't stress yourself with such fantasies," they say. "There are no such places in this world." But the little girl in the perfect city believes that there are. Somewhere out there is a terrible place, with no colors, no trees, no life. The only creature in sight is a malnourished crow, wobbling across a blackened branch. Help me, it seems to say, please.

* * *

The girl in the perfect city knows she has to do something. If there are people in the darkness, she has the feeling that they are suffering greatly. Anything can make a difference, she thinks. So she will start small. She packs a precious gift into a paper envelope, and ties it to the leg of a pigeon. It will fly to the darkened city, she thinks, and bring a speck of light to its gloom.

She sends the pigeon out the window. The most she can do is hope.

In the darkened city, the little girl looks out the window. A bird soars toward her. Its soft gray feathers contrast with the murk of the sky. The bird lands gracefully on a flickering streetlight. It cocks its head at the girl, as if an invitation to come closer. The girl does just that and creeps out the door, tiptoeing towards the light.

"Come down," she says softly when she reaches the bird, "I won't hurt you."

The bird flutters down and lands on her forearm. The little girl notices something tied to the pigeon's leg. An envelope, crisp and white and recently sealed. She unties the package from the bird's leg and opens it slowly. She shakes its contents out. A small vessel now rests on her hand. She closes her fist. The bird flies away. The little girl looks down again.

An acorn. She doesn't remember how she knows this. But she does.

Ten years later..

There lay a darkened city, beyond great mountains of waste, beyond forests of smoke, past gray wastelands.

Within this city sits a young woman, staring out her foggy window, gazing at a small green oak tree standing straight. Lonely but strong. The girl smiles.

A tiny splinter of life in an otherwise dead world.

Blue Jay

by Clara Rupiper, age 13

I still need a name, June thought to herself, shading in the underbelly of the dragon she was sketching in the margin of her homework. Her hero was standing boldly on the dragon's back, heroically gazing into the distance. BRRRING! BRRRRING! That's the bell. June thought, quickly dumping all of her papers into her backpack. She checked the schedule hanging on the wall of her math teacher, Mrs. Rutenberg's classroom. Only third period!? Seventh grade is hard. As usual, June was the last kid out the door. She was often teased about her love for fantasy, especially heroes with magical powers, but somehow, she managed to survive in middle school. Keep your head down, stay with your friend group, and be nice to everyone. That's how you survive here. But she wanted to be a hero! June wanted to be the kind of person people write stories about, the ones who stop the bullies and save the world! Juuust as soon as she could work up the courage to actually do something about... anything, really.



June pulled out an eyelash, a nervous habit. Ozzi, quit it! She scolded herself. Her anxiety had gotten worse in middle school, but she found an unusual way to deal with it- give it a name. She pretended there was a cute little dragonet in her head, with bright blue scales and indigo flecks. She called him Ozzi, and he was the voice in her head. All she had to do to stop worrying was talk to him for a little bit. No more eyelashes, and I'll eat a cookie, OK? She thought at him. OK! Ozzi squeaked back, happily settling on a tiny couch in her brain. Cookies, and no anxiety. Win-win.

"JUUNE!" a voice called from behind, startling June out of her thoughts. Her best friend, Mellie, slung an arm around her. June smiled.

"Mellie, about that sleepover-" A pained yelp cut off June's voice. A sixth grader was being pummeled into a locker.

"Think you're smart, huh?" The attacker hissed. "You're a (BEEP!) you (BEEPING!) (BEEPER!)" Most middle schoolers spoke with so many slurs and curses, that it was difficult to figure out what they were really saying. Mellie put an arm around June as she ducked her head, picking up her pace. Don't interfere. Stay out of it, stay safe. That's not what Spider-Man would do. Ozzi pointed out. Or Ms. Marvel. June's heart tightened, and she sighed. This was why she would never be a hero, like her imaginary alter-ego, whom she still hadn't named.

“You good?” Mellie asked, steering her outside, to recess. “You’re really quiet.” June nodded slowly.

“Yeah.” she sighed.

“GUESS WHAT!” June’s other bestie, Sylvia cried.

“What?” Jade and Mellie sighed. Sylvia was a great friend, but she was a little dramatic, and prone to ridiculous celebrity crushes.

“Johanna Evens posted a thing on Pinterest!” she sighed dreamily, and June giggled. Johanna Evens was a famous actor in many of Sylvia’s favorite shows, and Sylvia was crushing hard. Mellie rushed over to a bin and grabbed a basketball. “Please no.” Sylvia sighed. “Not basketball again.” June was about to say something, when she heard a frenzied chirrup.

“Did you hear that?” she asked worriedly, but her friends were gone. Sylvia was already on the court begging Mellie to play a different game. She peeked around a nearby shrub. A blue jay lay on the grass, with a wing stretched out at an awkward angle. “Poor thing.” June whispered. “Are you OK?” Be a hero! Ozzi chanted in her head, and before she knew it, the bird was safely cradled in her hands. June hid the injured bird until school was out, then she had begged her mom to bring it to the vet.

“Is it OK?” June nervously asked the vet. The vet smiled.

“She’ll be fine.” he assured her. “You were brave, bringing a wild animal here.” The vet told her. June’s heart thrummed. Me. Brave! A hero.

THE NEXT DAY

“Aaand, that’s what happened after school.” June finished telling her friends.

“So cool!” Sylvia squealed. Mellie shivered.

“Just don’t tell my mom.” she said. “She’ll make me get, like twelve rabies shots.”

“Mm-hmm.” June murmured, adding the finishing touches to her drawing. She named her alter-ego after the first thing she saved. After all, all heroes have to start somewhere, right? Ozzi nodded cheerily in her head. The perfect name. Blue Jay.

Standing Up for the Ocean

by Talia Schnake, age 13

I strode down the cement sidewalks, looking forward to my day at the beach. I grinned just thinking about it, I could splash in the water, surf on the waves and-

“Malena!” My best friend Aspen called, from behind me, “Wait up!”

“Sorry!” I responded, only then realizing that I had been speed walking.

I waited until Aspen reached my side, her light purple surf board clutched in her right arm.

“Were almost there!” Aspen shrieked, so loud I swear my eardrums almost popped.

“Sheesh! Quiet down when you do that!” I rubbed my ears.

“Sorry, I can’t help it! I’ve been looking forward to this since school started!”

“That’s a very long time....” I muttered, as school had ended only a week earlier.

“I know! It was soooo hard to wait,” Aspen was now energetically jumping up and down.

“Well.... We don’t have to wait anymore!” I smiled, as we moved so we had a perfect view of the beach.

“Finally were here!” She squealed, but came to an abrupt stop at the view.

The beach had changed, last year the water had been a crystal blue, and it sparkled when the sun hit it, the sand had been a yellowish, golden. There had been rocks in a few places, and you could see fish swimming everywhere, I even saw some sea turtles! This year it was different though... and not in a good way. The water was a dirty green and the sand was almost brown, I could see no fish in the water. There was trash everywhere, from plastic bags, straws and cups to wrappers, and even some debris! I could see pieces of stone and brick littered all over. But that wasn’t even the worst part, not even close. The worst part was the dead animals laying ashore. There were fish, their eyes wide open and staring into space, sea turtles motionless and even a dolphin. Some had no sign of being harmed, but others had nets, string or wire caught on their fins or heads. The smell made my stomach turn, and I nearly hurled, it burned my nose and made my eyes water. Aspen turned around and at the sound of retching I decided it was best I didn’t look.



“Aspen look!” I cried as I spotted a fish caught in wire struggling to free himself.

I dropped my surf, bored, and ran over, looking back at Aspen as she wiped her mouth and hurried over.

“Hold him still, I’m going to try to free him” I told her.

She nodded and obeyed, I grabbed the wire, pulling it off of his head, “Can you pick him up?” I asked.

As she picked him up, I wiggled and twisted the wire off him, smiling once he was free.

“Let’s let him in the ocean now!” Aspen began to walk to the ocean.

I ran up next to her as we walked into the dirty ocean water, getting deep enough in for the poor fish to swim away.

“We did it” Aspen breathed, a small smile curling her lips.

For a second I shared her joy, but then, I looked around seeing all the garbage, trash and dead animals, I felt tears burn my eyes. It just wasn’t fair! We were destroying the beach, these animals and plants, their habitat was being destroyed. All because of us and our stupid trash, one fat tear dripped down my face, I needed to fix this, and I would.

“I need to go home,” I told Aspen.

“Yeah, I’ll go to.... I’m not surfing in this. It’s so sad....”

Later at home, as I plopped in bed, my mind raced over what I had saw at the beach. I needed to help! I couldn’t leave it that way! And I wouldn’t, I got up and ran out of the house, I didn’t stop running until I was directly in front of a house I knew all too well. Aspen’s house, the baby blue of her house always made me feel calm and safe.

“What is it?” Aspen opened the door before my fist made contact.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about what we saw at the beach, and.... What if we made a cleanup the beach day!?” I asked, not able to contain my excitement.

“Hmm,” Aspen thought, “That is a good idea, but.... How would we inform others about this?”

“We make flyers!” I suggested.

“Perfect! Let’s get to work!”

Mole Hill Milkshake

by Elinor Woodard, age 13

Maya and I are walking down the street, her chubby toddler hand in mine. As we march down our block towards Grandma and Papa's house I see so many things. Beautiful things like big gardens with all sorts of colors and types of flowers. When I look down I see beneath my feet are pretty chalk drawings, jump ropes strewn on the ground near them. When I look up I see clouds in different wacky shapes that make me giggle. When I show Maya the duck I see she giggles along even though I don't think she knows what I'm giggling about.



But I also see less pretty things, I can't say the word ugly because Mama says eight year olds shouldn't say that. I see gross muddy puddles with worms at the bottom and I see flies swarming around a dead bird. And in the strip of lawn between the sidewalk and the street I see a mole tunnel bumping out of the ground. Our neighbor Mr Murray doesn't like the moles because he's getting too old to crush them into the ground.

I'm about to stomp on the tunnel when Maya shouts

"Stop! Amy! No!" I turn to see her tearing up.

"What's wrong Maya?" I ask hugging her.

"Don't hurt the...the.. guh-guh-ground puppies!" She wails pointing at the mole hill.

"Hey, it's okay..I won't hurt the moles," I whisper in her ear, "let's get to Grandma and Papa's house"

That night I think about what the right thing to do would have been. Stomping on the mole hill would have made Mr Murray pleased but Maya would have been so very disappointed. I think the right thing to do was let Maya get what she wanted. I know that some other kid was going to stomp on the hole anyways so Mr Murray wouldn't care. I don't know if I was being kind or just selfish. All I want is to be a good sister and make Maya look up to me. I feel all shaken up and confused like a milkshake. Was what I did kind? I hope so.

Perfection

by Oly K, age 14

"She's so perfect" They say and stare
"Look at her shoes, look at her hair"

"I bet she's stuck up." "I bet she found love."
"Her life looks like a movie."

I'm far from perfect, my blood runs cold.
I smile in public but cry on my own.

I try and I try but I always fail. I feel so alone,
and nobody cares.
I'm charming until you know me, I'm sincere
until I snap

I hate this feeling, it's uneasy and chilling
Then mania hits and the adrenaline is thrilling

A room full of people yet I feel alone
I feel depressed, I don't feel at home.

Mental health is no joke
The pressure of it makes me choke.

I crave for perfection
And I crave for attention

Yet as time goes on I start to notice
That times may be hard, but I've lost focus

There's always light in the dark
My life will make a mark

I am special, I have potential
One day I'll change the world

I've finally learned the life long lesson
I AM perfection



The Real Small Heroes

by Jocelyn Pflieger, age 14

When anyone else in the world thinks about a hero, I'm sure their mind goes immediately to those fictional heroes like Spider-man, or the Incredible Hulk. Maybe Batman, Wonder Woman, or Superman. But here, in my city, we don't have to obsess over these massive, disproportionate heroes that only exist in movie theaters and bookstores. Here, we have our own, real superhero to look up to.

Or rather, look down at.

Our hero, though real, doesn't seem as super as these superheroes do. At barely two feet tall, Superman, as he calls himself, or Gnome Superman, as the rest of the city calls him, it's difficult to really comprehend that he's saved us. Twice. Though I suppose it's hard to lose to a small man that can pop out of the ground under your feet.



My feet thumped against the concrete bringing me back to the present day, not the monologue I'd been planning to explain to my cousins why I had pictures of a weird earth creature pasted around my room. That day marked the second anniversary of Gnome's (notably easier to say than Gnome Superman's) appearance in the city. And everyone in their right mind was heading to our 'central park' to celebrate with the small hero himself.

As I approached, I could already hear the insane cheering coming from the park. I was late, as usual, due to my mother forcing me to clean my room. I have to give her credit, she saves nearly as many lives as Gnome does every day. As an emergency room nurse, she spends her days watching over the ill and the injured, doing everything in her power to make sure they see another day. But that doesn't mean she has to make me miss one of the year's biggest parties.

My friend, Cece, spots me from the edge of the park, running up to me and pulling on my arm.

"You're lucky you have me, y'know," she shouted over the screaming crowd. "I got good seats because I was on time,"

"Thanks," I muttered.

"What was that?" she shouted.

"I said thanks," I shouted, shaking my head before letting her drag me over the well-trampled grass to our 'good' seats.

As I took a seat in the dead grass, Cece's definition of a good seat, I got a perfect view of a big group of people clumped around what appeared to be nothing. A disadvantage to being tiny -- though you were in theory the most dangerous thing in town, you were easily trampled by obsessed humans.

"Do you want to go say hi?" Cece asked.

"Through that?" I muttered. "Impossible."

She rolls her eyes. "Come on, it's the one time to meet your literal idol!"

"Yeah, but what are the chances he'll actually talk to me when he's clearly not talking to anyone else over there." I sighed. "I'll be very happy if I even catch a glimpse of the guy,"

"You gotta have faith," Cece grabbed my arm and tried to pull me off the ground.

She nearly succeeded before I felt a small tremor in the ground, which sent a jolt through my body, like jumping and landing with my knees completely locked in place. I ripped my arm out of Cece's grip and placed my fingers on the ground, following the direction of the tremor.

"You really are in a bad mood, huh?" Cece said. "You'd think a girl would do anything to meet her hero. I mean, you have pictures of this guy around your entire room Bel and you're just sitting there when he's literally right--"

"Cece, be quiet," I told her, feeling the grainy, dry dirt under my fingers.

I crept a bit forward peeking over a nearby bush. Before my eyes, the ground slowly erupted, and the tiny man crawled out. I opened my mouth to shout, my eyes wide as the sun with surprise, before I heard the nasty words coming from his petite mouth, some I wouldn't repeat in front of my mother.

"I can't believe they throw whole parties. It's not like I do this for fun. It's the money that matters. Who cares if the world ends in flames," he continued grumbling as he walked away from the park leaving the people he couldn't care less about behind him.

I felt my mouth drop to the floor in disbelief. Before I knew it, I found myself back at home, ditching Cece back at the pointless party. My mother found me, surprisingly not at work.

"Hey, you're back early," her soft, glassy voice soothing me. "What happened?"

"I learned the literal reason to never meet your idols," I muttered, looking in the pantry for a bag of chips.

"Some small heroes are simply that. Small in size and small in mind," she told me. "I find that people often have different motivations than we are meant to believe."

I nodded and ripped open the bag of chips, stuffing a handful in my mouth. Mom shook her head and ran her fingers through my hair.

“How was your day?” I asked, trying to change the conversation.

“Hard.” She was quiet, quieter than normal. “Most of my patients are very healthy right now, but one of them,” she paused, swallowing. “One of them was unsuccessful,”

I carefully wrap my arms around her, feeling the warmth of her body on mine. “You did your best and that’s what matters,” I whispered.

“Thank you, Bel,” she whispered into my hair.

“You’re the real hero mom,” I muttered. “It doesn’t matter that Gnome Superman saves the city on the outside. You’re saving it on the inside, and that’s what really matters,”

She kissed the top of my head. “I’m glad that you think that.”

I smiled up at her, breaking the embrace and reaching for the bag of chips on the counter. “I’m glad I do too.”

Faces

by Eliza Thwing, age 14

You never know what you have till it's gone. Once gone your life seems to flip. You find yourself accessing the situation. Sometimes you're left more alone, sometimes you dodge a bullet. Sometimes you lose something, sometimes you gain something. The one thing that will always remain is a lesson learned. Good or bad, happy or sad, you learn. You learn lessons, and consequences. And if you suffer enough, you might just learn the most valuable lesson. The one people pay money for. The one some will never know.



August, 2022

My feet ache as I climb the many steps up to my house. Today was another day of drama, tests, and the worst stomach pains I've ever felt. I pause, looking out at our street. The trees are of all different shades of green, the flowers of all different colors and lengths. It was a beautiful spring day, so why did I feel this way? Taking a deep breath, I put on my people face.

Inside, mother and father were sipping wine and laughing at my little sisters putting on a dance performance with soft piano music playing in the background. All the windows in the living and dining room were open and you could smell all the shades of spring. How could I be sad on a day like this?

Smiling, I gave both of them a kiss on the cheek and my sisters a round of applause. Father insisted on me joining them on their little dance recital, so I followed their moves the best I could. Right after dinner was ready so we sat. My sister Abby complained about how hard 4th grade was, Mia supporting her claims as they came. I smiled and agreed, even though 8th grade was by far worse.

Looking over, I saw my backpack against the back of the couch. I hadn't even been able to make it up the stairs. After I finished my helping of steak and potatoes my mother insisted on taking a stroll outside before it was time for the little ones to go to bed.

As we were outside birds sang their songs and neighbors laughed and spoke with each other, or no one at all. We were part of this vision as we met with Abby and Mia's friend Ellie. At last, I was able to gather my backpack and head to my sanctuary.

I scroll on my phone looking, convincing myself to stay. It's just another phase. It's just another fight. My mind rolled with all the pain, loneliness, sadness. I had a perfect life on a perfect day, so why all the pain? We were still friends after all. There was only one logical solution...

September, 2022

The last class of the day was always the toughest. Here all my 'friends' were in one room together. It's all just more reminders why I'll never fit in. Always the butt of a joke, or the laugh of the century. A good class for them was gossip and watching movies. Mine was being productive. And surviving. It was time to put on my people face.

My mother's always told me I'm a people pleaser. All I want is to fit in somewhere. I always thought this was a good thing. Sadly, I didn't learn this was only a set back until I truly found that somewhere. And that brings us to months later.

April, 2022

I was in my final class of the day, my friend group had gone to the back of the room to watch a movie on one of their computers while I stayed in the front, trying to pay attention. That's when a girl by the name of Kris came to sit by me to take notes. We don't talk at first, she takes notes on the subject and I work on our latest project. Then she looks over to me and talks.

Her voice was kind and soft like a nice blanket during a harsh winter. She asks about what I've done and if she could work with me. I agree and we begin to work. At the end of class we finished and parted ways. The group came back towards me. Making fun of me being a scholar and having an A in our class.

The very next day we had the privilege to go to the library because we finished our assignment. The group got mad and huffed about it as we left. When we got there we found my favorite spot in the corner, which just so happened to be hers as well. She asked about me, my family, grades, and if I was actually friends with the 'group in the back.' She doubted I was from the very beginning of the year.

As I explained the situation, Kris showed me everything that had happened behind my back. Evidently they said everything they thought about me online. She also saw my marks. She made me swear I would break ties and never do that to myself again. I swore.

June, 2022

After doing so I didn't feel like I had to put on a people face. Me and Kris became friends and graduated together. I became willing to go for strolls with my family again. I got into therapy and began to play softball with Kris every weekend. Within the year we had dreams of getting on the highschool team.

There is a lesson in everything if you look close enough. Sure, sometimes you have to get a magnifying glass and truly look. Sometimes you might not want to admit you ever had to learn something. For me, I've learned never to waste your time on people who don't care. However the most important lesson of all; it's never worth it to put on an act. You should never have to change yourself for others. Always try to make new friends, they might just end up being your knight in shining armor in your time of need.

The Soldier and the Sergeant

by Anna, age 14

“Get down!” He yells. But his hands were already shoving me to the ground before I could react. It’s him. Again. Every week, while everyone else is doing just fine, he sees my weaknesses while I’m trying to focus on my own duties. He picks up the belongings that fell out of my bag. “These’ll weigh you down on the field, you don’t need them.” He takes my lunch and puts it in his own bag, and scatters the books I had brought from home all over the dirt. He puts his bag down. “Oh, and your glasses. You need perfect vision to survive out there.” He lifts the glasses off of my face and smashes them on the ground. I attempt to pick up the broken parts of the frame, but my hand gets cut on a shard of glass. I wince. “You got a small cut and you’re crying? What happens if someone up and leaves you broken and bruised when you’re all alone? No one will be there to save you.” He spits on my hand, soaking the blood in spittle. My hand falls on my knees. “Maybe you would be strong enough to fight your battles if you weren’t so much like a piece of paper, that could be easily torn apart by the slightest gust of wind” His glaring eyes shoot me. “I’m trying!” I yell. “Now they’ll find you. They’ll hear your voice, the voice of a fighter on the opposing team, and they’ll throw you in prison.” He covers my mouth and pushes me down, the impact feeling like a bomb exploding. I lay on the ground, on my back. “You won’t make it out there.” He kicks my side, picks up his bag, and leaves.



I rest. Stretched out across the dirt-covered ground, the soil stinging my cut. The grass next to me, flattened by his gigantic boots, looks about as lively as me. My glasses lay in pieces, as shattered as my esteem.

But then—Silenced weapons. A pair of hands—no, not his hands—these hands are dark like the earth and soft like the sky. They pick up the fragments of my glasses with care and set them aside. They collect my books and stack them in a pile next to me. They pick up my hand and place a Band-Aid over the wound, tending to the injury with love. “Are you okay?” Their voice reverberates in my ear. “I’ll be...fine.” I say. “I can help you.” They hold their hand outstretched, and I hesitate. Their knuckles don’t have any signs of being in battle, and their palms look gentle. So I take their hand. Their fingers intertwine with mine, and they lift me up. They brush the dirt off of my clothes, nurturing them back to cleanliness. “He’s really mean.” They say. “I’m sure it’s just because he’s an 8th grader—” “No, no kid should be forcing you to change yourself. You should just be you.” “Should I fight back?” “No. I’m sure he’s fighting his own battles, but you should definitely tell someone if he keeps doing this to you. I have to leave, but good luck.” They go back in the direction where they had come from.

The next day, as I'm walking to class, my eyes widen as I see the same boy being pushed down by someone even older. He cringes as they push him and empty his bag like he had done to me. Should I help someone who had hurt me before? Shouldn't he deserve this? No. I wait for the person attacking him to leave, and I help him up, just as the kind soul had helped me up yesterday. "Are you okay?" "Why would you help me...just yesterday, and weeks before then you had been put in a similar situation by me." "Because even if a soldier is being hurt by a sergeant, they can both grow from that experience and become lieutenants. Soldiers don't fight their battles alone, they fight them in armies". It takes the bravery of thousands of troops to say something, and I want to pass on that courage to you".

London's Little Light

by Phoebe Bowen, age 15

Of all the cities in the world, London shines the brightest. It is a fact, I think, stepping down from the airplane's exit steps onto the Heathrow platform, ushered along by a young, British flight attendant. "Watch your step, love," She coos to me softly. Too stunned to speak, the words Thank You echo in my head as I smile up at her stupidly. She called me love! How can any city be more beautiful than this?

The only thing better than seeing London's city lights through the airplane window upon landing (a pleasure I'd fought long and hard with my sister for), was seeing them through the glass, airport panels upon beginning a vacation I've, for years now, dreamt of. The moment felt surreal. Me, here, a thousand miles from home. Already in love with a place I never thought I'd see.



"We're here," I say. "We're actually here. We're in London. THIS is London. I'm looking at London."

"How very astute of you," says my little sister, tired from the journey. "Why is it so rainy?" She presses her small, runny nose to the panel, smearing the glass with her snot. "And why is everyone fat?"

"That's rude, Miranda." I say.

"You're rude."

"No, YOU'RE rude."

"You're RUDER."

"Girls!" Says my mother.

"I'm surprised they even have escalators here," says Miranda, as we make our way down to collect our luggage.

"That's racist," I say.

"You can't be racist towards white people."

"Yes you can."

"No you can't!"

"Yes you can!"

“GIRLS!” Says my mother.

As we make our way through the crowded, lively airport, I manage to get myself lost at least six times.

“You are always parading off in some direction, Phoebe, without knowing where you’re going! For once, could you manage to stay focused for more than two seconds!?” My mother yells at me, dragging me along by the hand. Her sharp nails dig into my skin.

“She’s fantasizing about all the fat people,” says Miranda, dryly.

“Why don’t you jump out a window?” I shoot back.

“Don’t joke about that, Phoebe. And stop calling the English fat, Miranda, they don’t like that.”

“How would you know?” Sneers Miranda.

“OKAY,” Interjects my father. “You know what’s really fascinating about London? In the United States, when we go to collect our luggage, it’s called baggage claim, right? Well, here, it’s called baggage reclaim? Huh? Isn’t that cool! I think that’s cool. Who knew, right? Things are so different here and we’re still only in the airport!”

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” says Miranda.

“Keep going...” Warns my mother.

The next few days pass by like a dream. My family and I explore the beautiful city, taking everything from subways to buses to trains to boats. I watch my family grow more and more tired as I fall increasingly in love. I ferry them all through downtown, dragging my sister by the hand as we cross Tower Bridge, visit the West End, and wait in line at the British Museum.

“How can any city be more beautiful than this?” I ask.

“I want to go home,” says Miranda.

As the weeks go by, it becomes harder and harder to ignore my sister’s ravaging temper and my mother’s baggy, bleary eyes. I know they’re both tired, but... what difference does it make? I am having the time of my life! London, London, London, my mind keeps saying. I am here in London.

“Phoebe! What are you wearing?!” Yells my mother, looking at me through the door frame that connects our two bedrooms. The hotel, I’ve noticed, has begun to stink. Badly.

“What do you mean?” I ask, confused. “A dress.”

“You call that a dress?! I asked you to pack something nice for our English breakfast. You might as well be wearing rags. Put something else on.”

“Mommy, it... it is nice. It’s a dress. I don’t understand—”

“Don’t argue with me! It is a shirt with some ruffles. I specifically told you to pack something nice! I’m very tired and don’t have time to deal with this right now. Ugh, did you even shower?! You smell like a pig! Put something else on!”

“I-I don’t have anything else...” I’m on the verge of tears.

My mother fumes. “Well, you’ll just have to wear that then, I guess. I am very disappointed in you, Phoebe.” She storms from the room.

I burst into tears, sobbing into my hands. “I-I don’t understand...” I mumble to Miranda, who watches from the bed. “I-I tried... She... She never spoke to me like that before.”

Of all our adventures in London thus far, the English breakfast is the first I don’t enjoy. The food is wonderful, the waiter kind, and the view spectacular. However, my mother sits there like a dried pickle, glaring at me from across the illustrious tablecloth. After about thirty minutes, I can no longer stand it.

“Please excuse me,” I say. “I need to use the toilet.”

It doesn’t take long for Miranda to find me in the bathroom.

“Sorry Mommy’s treating you like this,” she says, solemnly. Hot tears begin to drizzle down my face again.

“Why does she hate me all of a sudden?”

“She doesn’t hate you, Phoebe. She envies you.” I can’t help but laugh in her face. “What? How can she envy me?”

“Don’t you see. She wishes she had your love of travel. She wishes she could fall in love with cities like you... It’s what Daddy wanted.”

I look at her, sadly. “Really?”

“Yeah... he wanted to live with her in L.A. but... she picked Wisconsin. This trip she planned was for you and for him. She never wanted it for herself.”

I stare at Miranda, taken aback. “I didn’t know that.” She shrugs. I pull her into a deep hug.

“Thank you for telling me, Miranda. You’re my hero. London’s little light.”

Unsung Heroes

by Nina Zhu, age 15

At age five, I knew what I wanted to be. Listening to pop songs and hit singles about love and heartbreak made me sure I would be a musician when I grew up, just like Taylor Swift. As kids, we all have dreams, but for me, I believed it was more than just a dream—it was destiny. I was determined to be a star someday and follow in Taylor’s footsteps. Late at night, when I should have been asleep, I would watch her music videos in bed and sing with a hairbrush as my microphone. One year, after learning that Taylor played the ukulele, I begged my parents for one as a Christmas present. I memorized all her lyrics, and when I realized I didn’t have her vocal talent, I began taking piano lessons instead. When I discovered that, unlike my singing, I had a knack for playing it, I quickly fell in love with the instrument and could feel my dream coming to fruition.



I vividly remember an assignment in third grade when my teacher asked us to interview a hero who had made an impact on our community and ourselves. My first thought was, of course, Taylor Swift, but I soon realized interviewing her would be close to impossible. Instead, I tried to look around me for people who had helped me throughout my life but couldn’t come up with any ideas. With just a week to finish the project, everyone else was busy writing interview questions and setting up interview times with their heroes, while I had no idea who to interview in the first place.

One winter evening, just a few days later, I had just finished a lesson at my piano teacher Ms. Chi’s house and was packing up my music when she got a call on her phone. When she hung up, she informed me that my mom’s car had gotten stuck in a snowstorm on her way to pick me up and couldn’t keep driving. Since my dad was also gone on a business trip, I would have to wait another hour or so.

As an impatient third grader, I was immediately annoyed that I would have to wait an hour in the cold before my mom arrived. But before I could begin sulking, Ms. Chi insisted that I stay with her while my mom waited out the storm. Feeling guilty for my selfishness, I thanked her with a slightly sheepish look on my face. Ms. Chi invited me to sit in her living room and quickly came out of the kitchen with two cups of warm milk tea with tiny black spheres floating on the bottom.

“Here,” she said, handing one to me, “It’s called zhēnzhū nǎichá. It’s from Taiwan—when I was your age, I made something similar but without the tapioca pearls.”

“When you were my age?!” I blurted out, incredulously. “I don’t even know what tapioca is.” Ms. Chi laughed. “Just try it! it’s perfect on a day like this.”

Taking a careful sip, I was instantly comforted by the warm and sweet milk, and delighted at the pleasant chewiness of the so-called tapioca pearls.

“So how did you learn to make this when you were my age?” I asked, in between sips.

“Well, growing up my parents worked in the city during the day, so I had to take care of my younger siblings after school. Milk tea was one of their favorites, so I learned how to brew my own tea and add milk. It’s quite simple, actually—the tapioca pearls are a more modern addition.”

With warm bubble tea in our hands and the fireplace crackling in the background, Ms. Chi told me endless stories about her childhood in Taiwan. From her rigorous schoolwork and job as a caretaker to moving to the United States and the various jobs she picked up, I couldn’t help but feel inspired by the adversities she overcame. We bonded over our love of Taylor Swift, and she showed me pictures of a Taylor Swift concert she attended in college. With so much time to kill, she gave me extra lesson time for free, even teaching me one of my favorite Taylor Swift songs, “Back to December,” on the piano.

When my mom finally arrived, face red and nose running from the freezing air, she had to drag me out of Ms. Chi’s apartment to get me to leave. On the car ride home, I suddenly remembered the English assignment due next Monday. Without even knowing, I realized I had just interviewed my hero for my project. The entire time, I had been so focused on chasing after celebrities who graced the headlines with their multimillion-dollar donations and award-winning careers that I failed to see the subtle, yet profound impact of the heroes around me. Ms. Chi may not have had money or fame, but the time and effort she put into making me feel safe that snowy evening and fostering a passion for music in her students could be felt by anyone around her. From my parents, who worked tirelessly to support and provide for me, to my teachers, who dedicated themselves to nurturing my education, these heroes have shaped my entire life.

Although my career goals may have changed now that I am older, I still carry with me the lessons I learned from my third-grade English assignment. The acts of kindness from those around us are so often overlooked and taken for granted, but even the smallest gestures have the potential to turn someone’s day around. I still have a deep respect for Taylor Swift and will always enjoy listening to her songs, but my idea of a hero has now expanded. So, I encourage you to go out and channel the everyday heroes in your life, whether it’s smiling at someone on the street or complimenting a stranger’s outfit, because at the end of the day, anyone can be a hero.

A Garden of Kindness

by Annabel Goldberger, age 16

James Dwyer ruled his sixth-grade class with an iron fist. A stout, rigid man who delighted in making children dread school, he assigned a mass of homework after every painfully boring lesson. His students, though, never despaired at the thought of coming to class, for every day at 8:05 a.m., they were visited by their very own guardian angel.



Mrs. Anderson was a petite, wrinkled woman with snowy hair and round eyes that shone invitingly behind her cat-eye glasses. Her passion for gardening was evident, both in the floral patterns she wore often and how pleased she was to tend to the school gardens, which lay right outside Mr. Dwyer's classroom. His students enjoyed visiting her, as she made them feel there was nothing more enjoyable than hearing them talk. She promised that her tiny office, which housed nearly as many plants as the gardens themselves, was always open if they ever needed to talk.

She kept her word.

One particularly bleak day in late fall, Sonja Chen came barreling into Mrs. Anderson's office, crying so loudly that her potted plants shook. Mrs. Anderson handed her a handkerchief and listened as Sonja, sniffing, recounted being bullied for months by older girls who made fun of her lunch: bok choy and rice pudding. They had snapped Sonja's chopsticks, the splinters of which littered the cafeteria floor.

As though by magic, Mrs. Anderson produced a pair of beautifully carved chopsticks from an ornate box on her desk and pressed them into Sonja's hands, offering a reassuring smile. "We cannot let bullies dim the light our culture brings us," she whispered kindly. "It's what makes us who we are."

From that day forward, Sonja wore her heritage as a badge of honor.

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Austin Arnolds, a thin, freckled boy, raced up the steps to school one freezing Tuesday in December two at a time, as he was quite late. He shouted a brief hello to Mrs. Anderson, who was covering the hedges with tarp.

"Where's your hat, Austin?" she called after him. "You're turning blue!"

"S'all right, blue's my favorite color!" he yelled back.

She watched, frowning, as he disappeared into the school.

The next afternoon, as Austin gathered his mountain of homework, a pop of color in the back of his cubby caught his eye. Looking around suspiciously, he peered in to find a brilliant blue knit cap, complete with a Pom-Pom at the top. A note attached to the top read:

Stay warm, Austin. - Mrs. A.

He pulled the hat on with a grin, grateful beyond belief for her kindness.

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“She’s not here today!” announced Lavender to the students a week later as they filed into class quickly, noses runny from the cold. “I’ve been waiting for her for an hour!”

“Why were you here so early?” inquired Austin, doffing his new hat.

Lavender’s cheeks turned scarlet. “None of your business.”

“If she’s sick, we should help her out!” chimed in Sonja.

“How?” Jordan’s reply was muffled as he struggled to take off his jacket.

“My mom brings me soup when I’m sick!”

“Does anybody have soup?” called Sonja.

Sixteen lunchboxes were unzipped immediately.

“I’ve got tuna!”

“Pizza, again.”

“Ooh, a quarter!”

“That’s a button, Austin.”

“D’you think she’d like animal crackers?”

“What on Earth are you all doing?” Mr. Dwyer entered, slamming a stack of worksheets down on his desk. “Lunch isn’t for hours!”

Everyone scrambled to shove their lunches back into their backpacks.

“I’m sure she’ll be back soon,” whispered Lavender grimly when Mr. Dwyer turned his back.

But, as the following weeks dragged on, it became clear that it was no common cold that stopped Mrs. Anderson from coming to school. It felt like an eternity since they had seen her last, and they were miserable in her absence. Still, they maintained hope that she would return soon. That was, until the day when each child arrived home from school to a crisp, somber invitation in their mailboxes, enclosed alongside a colorful pack of seeds.

Lavender wept. Sonja's hands flew to her mouth. Austin simply stared ahead, unblinking.

Jordan crumpled the invitation in anger.

Mr. Dwyer's classroom was empty the following day. It was a strange sight: sixteen small people, each dressed in black, shuffling single-file toward a church pedestal housing a small, closed casket. To the mourners around them, they gave the impression of a flock of baby penguins hurrying to say goodbye to their mother. One by one, the children stepped forward and, in the clearest voices their trembling mouths could muster, said their goodbyes to Mrs. Anderson, who lay still and unfeeling beneath the glossy wood.

"She was my hero," whispered Lavender. "Y'know, she did my hair every morning before school? Braided it all nice and such because my mom can't no more."

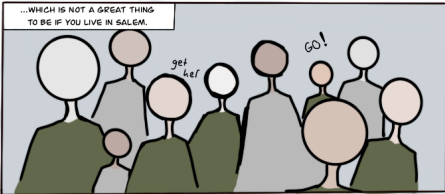
Nobody spoke. Though they tried to keep it together, they could not bear to stay much longer, as death lingered thickly in the church. Slowly, the students returned to class in a haze of grief, where Mr. Dwyer awaited with thick, brain-melting grammar packets.

Painstakingly, ploddingly, their lives resumed. Saddened smiles began to grace the students' faces again. Though the school's brambles grew thick and unmanageable and the flowers she had so carefully tended to wilted forever, Mrs. Anderson's legacy was overwhelmingly evident. She was present in the shy smile Lavender shared with Sonja after asking to try some of her lunch; in the look of concentration on Austin's face as he taught himself how to knit hats for his siblings, and then, how to braid Lavender's hair; in the unwavering kindness that those sixteen people showed the world every day in her absence.

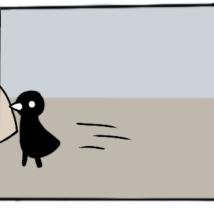
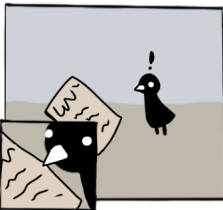
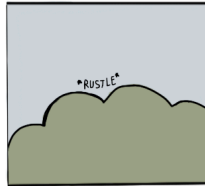
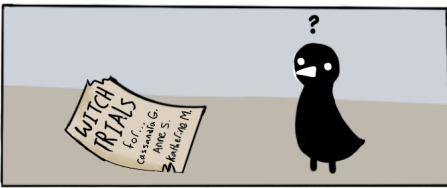
As the children left for school each morning, they caught sight of blooming, beautiful flowers growing wildly in their yards, courtesy of the seeds Mrs. Anderson had left each of them. The sun peeked through the horizon again, allowing Mrs. Anderson's guidance, ever-present and loving, to sprout deep roots in the hearts of Mr. Dwyer's sixth-graders forever.

Guilty

by Mathilde Bloom, age 12



- 1 -

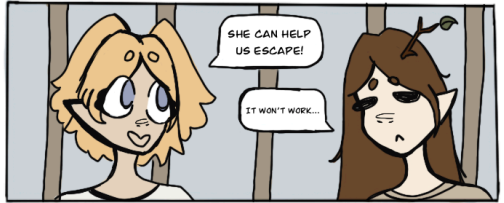
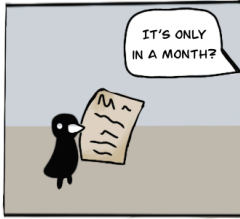
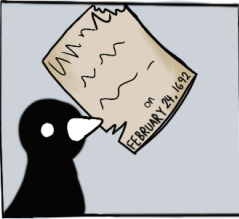


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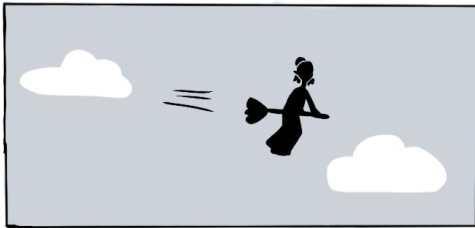
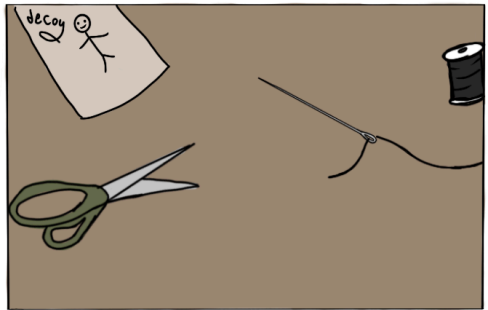
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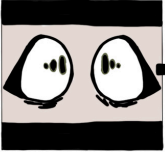
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10 HOURS
— later —



I THINK I'M DONE.



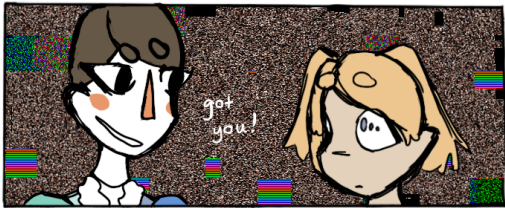
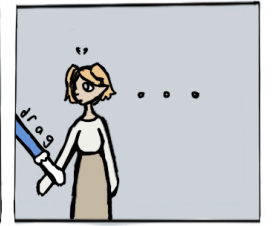
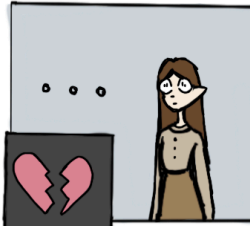
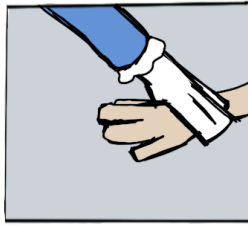
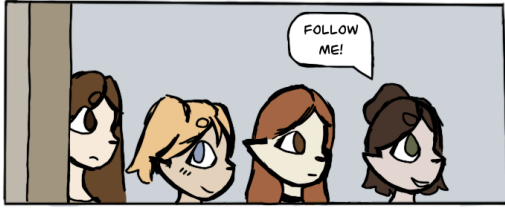
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About the Anthology

The 2024 **We Read Youth Voices Young Writer's Contest** is a collaboration between Madison Public Library, Forward Madison FC, and the Wisconsin Book Festival with funding provided by the Madison Public Library Foundation.

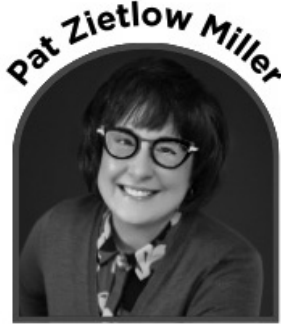
Young writers across Madison were encouraged to submit stories on the theme of Celebrate Small Heroes. We invited youth to submit any story, poem, song, illustration or piece that celebrated empathy, seeing things from new perspectives and coming together as a community, and we were overjoyed to see that more than 125 youth submitted to the contest this year.

This anthology represents the highlights of those submissions, judged by a panel of Madison community writers and advocates for youth. We sincerely thank all of the writers who had the courage to share their voices with us: you are truly an inspiration.

We want to thank our panel of community judges for their hard work in carefully reading and considering each submission. Our judges represent a wide swath of the literary community here in Madison:



Assistant Superintendent at MMSD



Local Author & Book Festival Alumni



Local Author & Book Festival Alumni



Forward Madison FC Team Member



WE READ Youth Voices Youth Ambassador



Citycast Podcast Member