



Teen Writers Project!



2024 Contest Winners

POETRY · FICTION · NON-FICTION

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The Center for the Arts (CFA) mission is to enrich lives by supporting, promoting, and connecting literary, performance, and visual artists of all ages to our communities.

As part of carrying out our mission, the CFA is excited to support our teen writers in their pursuit of creative expression through the literary arts. Each year we offer this teen writing contest to students age 12 through 18 who reside or attend school in Andover, Bradford, Danbury, Grantham, New London, Newbury, Newport, Springfield, Sunapee, Sutton, Warner, or Wilmot.

This booklet is a compilation of submissions in short fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction from the 2024 contest. Thank you to all our students, teachers, schools, and sponsors for supporting these talented individuals. *Enjoy!*

Acknowledgements

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- Tom Coverdale previously of Sunapee Middle High School
- Makayla Gosselin of Kearsarge Middle High School
- Heidi Fagan of Mount Royal Academy



2024 Winning Entries

Poetry

1. Arianna Garceau, Sunapee, fourth year at SMHS – To be an Unpronounceable Word (with thanks to Katie Flint)
2. Gabriella Soto, Newport, second year at SMHS – Siren's Sonnet (with thanks to Katie Flint and Scott Macnamee)
3. Jenna Valela, second year at KRHS – Langan (with thanks to Makayla Gosselin)

Fiction

1. Jenna Valela, second year at KRHS – Hurricane Inbound (with thanks to Makayla Gosselin)
2. Arianna Garceau, Sunapee, fourth year at SMHS – How to Measure Grief (with thanks to Katie Flint)
3. Annaliese Rowell, Sunapee, first year at Colby-Sawyer College – Step by Step

Non-Fiction

1. August Bates, second year at KRHS – A Thank You Letter to the Ocean (with thanks to Chris Dayhoff)
2. Annaliese Rowell, Sunapee, first year at Colby-Sawyer College – When You Bother About Giraffes
3. Harper Hoglund, 7th grader at KRMS – C is for Coughing (with thanks to Dr. Scolforo)

First Place Poetry
Arianna Garceau

To be an Unpronounceable Word

How it must ache to be an unpronounceable word
To be made up of such composure
That your mere appearance is none other
Than intimidating.
And how miserable it must be
To know
No one would ever attempt to pronounce you.
Because
Why should they?
You should be simpler.
More harmonious.
Don't try so hard.
Shorten yourself for others.
So they can understand you
It's.
All.
Your.
Fault.
Because in a world where options are limitless,
Why should someone have to struggle to understand you
When they could spend their time elsewhere.
But in a world where options are limitless
And everyone around you is manageable
And you are not,
Find someone who pronounces your name anyways.
And find someone
Who repeats it like its oxygen.

Second Place Poetry
Gabriella Soto

Siren's Sonnet

Beneath the stars, where silence parts the sea,
A fisherwoman drifts on the moonlit tide,
And in the depths, a voice beacons and pleas,
A song as soft as sorrow itself sighed.
His melody, a spindle of silver woe,
Weaves through the waves like whispers in the deep;
It stirs the salt, and yet she does not know
The depth of grief that wakes her from her sleep.
He sings of love, but drowned beneath the brine,
His song is lost within the vast ocean's throat;
She pulls her nets, and he is left behind,
A phantom tethered to the waves she wrote.
And when the morning casts its light anew,
She feels his song- yet can't remember who...

Third Place Poetry
Jenna Valela

Langgan

I am not your messiah.

I am not a savior

prophesied since days of yore.

I am not the second coming

of a god of eons past.

I am not your sacrifice.

I am not a lamb

to be sent to slaughter

and fed the golden-fanged lion,

or the system of conquest that lead you to lands

that are not yours to claim.

I am twelve.

First Place Fiction

Jenna Valela

HURRICANE: INBOUND

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[And...recording started. Alright, Kazeo, go ahead.]

Okay. Let me set the scene.

[Oh god.]

I, Kazeo Matayoshi, have been taken hostage after the Sixth Sun, a terrorist group notorious for their belief that the Vessels who have been blessed by the gods of ancient civilizations are superior to humans, attacked an orphanage I worked at to get a subject for their power-stealing machine. I nobly gave myself up to save the innocent orphans, and have since spent two days in their company. Today, they've brought me to their facility to make me their first human test subject.

And let me just say, I hated the way that place smelled.

It was so...surgical, for lack of a better word. The facility they had me in, see, it was one part laboratory and one part infirmary. The mix of chemicals and laughing gas genuinely made me want to puke my guts out. But I resisted the urge to heave as Gideon dragged me into the room and shoved me into the transfer chair.

[How very noble of you.]

What's that supposed to mean? You know what, nevermind.

"Gideon, be gentle," Emrys chastised him. "He won't be of much use to us if he's dead."

"He's not much use to us now," Gideon grumbled, but he backed off and left the room.

"That's why we're doing this." Emrys, with her nails like talons and her eyes burning coals, pinched my chin and forced me to look at her. "Kazeo, in just a little bit, you'll be one of us. Isn't that exciting?"

"Very," I told her.

Man, it was so fun getting into character for this mission. Hear this: I'd spent my whole life hoping for a gift from the gods only to not even be spared a glimpse. But not anymore. As she strapped

me into the machine, I couldn't help but smile. I stretched out, lounging with the knowledge that soon, very, very soon...I'd be a Vessel too.

I mean, that's not really why I was smiling, but they didn't know that.

Emrys began to plug in the injectors, just as Gideon dragged in the poor schmuck whose powers I was stealing. I didn't recognize him. He looked like he'd been drugged out of his mind—and I wouldn't be surprised if he was. His curly hair was so platinum blonde that it looked white in the severe light of the laboratory, and his half-lidded eyes were a sort of silvery-purple. His expression was dopey and soft, almost childlike. If he wasn't taller than me, I would've thought he was an actual child. If he had been, I might've felt bad and asked Xolotl if they could find someone else. Not that he'd listen to me. It doesn't matter anyway. This guy was definitely older than me.

[Why are you describing them like you're in a romance novel?]

Shut up, Akeem. I'm being dramatic.

Anyway, Gideon dropped him onto the floor in front of us. He seemed to almost float down, coming to a gentle stop on the cold tile. He mumbled something intelligible, and man, I almost felt guilty.

Emrys rolled her eyes at Gideon and summoned her lashers, brimstone chains snaking out across the floor and dragging the person closer towards us. She used one to tilt his head up. She squinted. "...And who is this?"

Gideon shrugged. "Some guy who got exalted the other day. Ah Lam picked him up before the Public Defense bastards got him."

"So that's why she hasn't been around lately," Emrys mused. "She was on babysitting duty."

"Yup. Poor bastard, having to babysit a vegetable."

"Has he been asleep the whole time?" I asked.

Gideon crossed his arms. "So I've heard."

And then, suddenly—Xolotl! The dog himself. Leader of the Sixth Sun, the notorious Vessel supremacist terrorist group—and my boss. Well, ex-boss.

[I know who Xolotl is. You don't have to explain it.]

Do I need to reiterate? I. Am. Being. Dramatic.

"He's the chosen Vessel of Hypnos," Xolotl said, striding into the room with a stern look in his eyes. Ah Lam followed suit, eyeing the Vessel distastefully. "Emmanuel Lee. Got hit by a car, was exalted, and never woke up."

"Is he a Vessel or just dead?" Gideon asked bluntly, nudging Emmanuel with his shoe.

[He has a point.]

Never say that again.

"I did not chug energy drinks for 48 hours straight for you to ask that question," Ah Lam snapped, and Gideon glared at her.

[...Why would she need to drink so many energy drinks?]

I don't know, man. Maybe he was, like, psychic attacking her with sleep magic.

"Yes, he's a Vessel," Xolotl interrupted. "He's got the powers of Hypnos. He's a bit, ah...disembodied, currently, but his spirit should pose no threat to this operation."

I eyed the poor schmuck warily. "...That won't happen to me, will it?"

Xolotl only shrugged. Very comforting of him.

[I don't suppose the head of a terrorist organization is supposed to be comforting.]

He could at least lie. It's not like he makes a point of being honest.

Emrys fussed with Emmanuel's lifeless body until she finally got him hooked up to the machine. She straightened my shoulders, fingernails digging into my skin. "Don't worry, darling," she purred into my ear, making me viscerally uncomfortable—though I suppose that was the point. "It shouldn't hurt that bad."

"I should hope not."

She laughed—a horrible, screechy laugh, befitting of the Vessel of Tisiphone—and at Xolotl's command, she pulled the lever.

Let me tell you, the pain was instant. It surged through my body like a bursting dam, thundering through my veins and forming a heavy mass in my gut. I gritted my teeth. I'm gonna be honest, man, for a second there I wondered if it was worth it. I wanted to get out of there as fast as possible. But no, no, no, no, no, duty calls. I had to stick it through.

Something warm and sticky trickled down my cheek. It was a very uncomfortable feeling. Ah Lam squinted at me with what could almost be concern. "Is he supposed to do that?"

Emrys wiped the blood off my face and licked it off her fingers. No, seriously. It was gross and it felt violating. If anyone ever tries that again I'm decking them on the spot. "Eh, who knows. Not like we've ever done this before."

How comforting.

I was strapped to the chair to prevent me from thrashing too much, but I still fought it. I had to bite my lip to keep from screaming. Emmanuel whimpered and shook.

It was so weird. Something shimmering gold—Emmanuel's divine essence or something, I dunno—pumped through the translucent tubes wired between the two of us. A smile danced on Xolotl's canine lips. "Working as intended."

On the floor, Emmanuel shuddered. His eyes fluttered open for a brief second and then closed again. The pathetic wail that escaped his lips almost made me want to back out. Well, more than I already did. But I couldn't. It was too late to back out. I had to go through with it.

When the golden substance reached my skin, it burned like hell. I resisted the urge to shake it off. One wrong move, and the whole thing could come crumbling down.

I just had to keep telling myself, Wait it through, Kazeo. Just wait it through.

Then, BAM! The door to the laboratory burst open. Some lackey stood in the doorway, breathing heavily with blood trickling through a crack in their helmet. All their lackeys had these cool helmets painted with Vantablack or something. You've seen them—they just look like holes. But this guy's helmet was broken, and he was bleeding, so the illusion was ruined.

"Boss!" The goon sounded like he's going to collapse any second now. "PubDef—they're here! We're surrounded!"

Fire flickered in Xolotl's eyes. Ah Lam backed up a little bit. "What?"

"There's like four of them down there! Izanami, a-and Nemesis, and Morrigan. And what's-his-face—the fire guy! With the horns! Kag-something!"

I'm definitely calling Hinote Kag-something next time I see him.

[Don't.]

You can't stop me.

Xolotl looked at him, then at me, then at the screen in Emrys's hands. She was the one keeping track of the progress, see. She read its contents to him: "Eleven percent done."

I could see the gears turning in his head. "All of you, come with me. Kazeo, stay here until the process is finished, then meet us downstairs if we haven't finished things by then."

"Yes, sir," I told him, hoping the pain wasn't audible in my voice.

Xolotl turned, a torch spilling radiant flames flashing into existence in his hands. The only good thing about Xolotl was that torch. It's super cool looking. I wish you'd let me keep it.

[It's dangerous. Knowing you, you'll light something on fire on accident.]

Oh, screw you.

Anyway, Emrys and Gideon followed him out the door without hesitation. Emrys even laughed, probably ecstatic about getting to murder some people. Ah Lam glanced back at Emmanuel, then at me with narrowed eyes. She left with them after a moment.

She never did trust me. I suppose she was right for that.

BAM! Electricity surged through the machine, overloading it. Emmanuel gasped and whimpered as the connection was cut off. I pulled the plugs out of my skin and wrenched myself out of the chair, sore, but alive.

I took a minute to stretch and get the horrible feeling of excess power out of my bloodstream. Believe me, Akeem, that shit hurt. I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy.

I leaned against the machine as I looked around. Remember, Xolotl said Emmanuel was disembodied by his exaltation, but something had been done to him to keep him out of the way. I couldn't see him anywhere, so I was just like, "Hey. I don't know where you're at, but I'll get someone to come for you after we're done with this, alright?"

I didn't get an answer, unless you count another pathetic whimper.

A gust of wind dragged my helmet and rollerblades out of the tiny room they'd kept me in. I donned them both and kicked my feet, lightning swirling around my ankles and flowing into the wheels. I skated off towards the nearest exit. I—Kazeo Matayoshi, Public Defense spy and Vessel of Susanoo—had some terrorists to beat up.

[Why did you pause?]

Dramatic effect, Akeem. Obviously. This is the third time I've said this.

Gideon didn't see it coming.

Gideon was always a bumbling doofus. A violent bumbling doofus, but a bumbling doofus nonetheless. I wouldn't be surprised if he always had been the kind to immediately turn to violence in any situation even before he'd been exalted by Ares. Maybe that's why Ares exalted him.

Either way, he was too busy trying to land a hit on the horrifying lizard-dog abomination that is Nemesis to notice me. Now, I really like Nemesis. She's very nice when she isn't going eldritch and eating people, you know? But she's fucking scary. I could see it in Gideon's eyes that he was freaked out—so freaked out, in fact, that he had no idea I was about to deck him on the spot.

And that I did.

WHAM! He didn't even have time to scream before his head met the pavement, courtesy of my awesome, amazing, lightning-powered rollerblades. Nemesis, her human mind just present enough to know the difference between friend and foe, gave me a once-over and ran off to deal with someone else. I pitied whichever terrorist had to fend her off.

Gideon was still somewhat conscious, despite the concussion he definitely now had. "Who the fuck are you?" he asked.

I smirked, though he couldn't tell I was doing it because I was wearing my helmet.

[How did you sneak it past them? Did they not search you or anything?]

Oh, they did. Cecilia just magicked them over once they decided I wasn't a threat.

Anyway, I hovered one foot over Gideon's throat, lightning flickering dangerously close to his neck. He winced. "Wouldn't you like to know."

The idiot didn't recognize my voice. Well, I think it was the helmet muffling my voice, but I like to think he's just an idiot. "You one of them PubDef bastards?"

I didn't get a chance to answer. I saw something move towards me in my peripheral vision, and I dodged a strike from one of Emrys' lashers.

Emrys cackled and attacked again. Her lashers cut gashes in the pavement every time I skated out of the way. "And who would you be?"

"Susanoo, if it matters." I skated past Morrigan and Kagutsuchi—sorry, no, Morrigan and Kag-something. For some reason, I kid you not, Morrigan was just sitting on his shoulder

shouting orders at her crows. How the hell she held on as he beat the shit out of a bunch of goons, I don't know. But it was hilarious, man. I wish you could've seen it.

[I'll see if Cecilia has any footage of it.]

Alright, anyway. Emrys was probably about to say something weird and murder-horny, but she was interrupted when I tried to stab her boss.

No, literally. I noticed Izanami brandishing her scythe at Xolotl, a lackey laying dead at her feet. Her blade dripped with blood. Xolotl thrust his torch in her face, but she dodged. He was so focused on her that I had the perfect opening to summon my sword with a BZZT-SHING and rush at him at lightning speed.

Unfortunately, he did dodge. But I caught him offguard, and Izanami covered me when Emrys sent her lashers at me.

Xolotl regained his bearings. "Oh? So you have a new friend." He laughed, licking his teeth. "Trying to outnumber us? We'll have a fair fight soon enough."

Izanami isn't a party pooper, so she played along and pretended she didn't know what they were talking about. Obviously, she did, but she knows me well enough to know what I probably wanted. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"What it means," Emrys laughs, wrapping her arms around a slightly disgruntled Xolotl, "Is that you've failed! Obviously you've heard of our transfer machine—that's why you came. But it's too late! Any minute now, our newest member will be with us to make this easy work."

Okay, maybe I shouldn't have done what I did next, but, like, she gave me the perfect opportunity! The comedic timing was perfect.

[...Did you do what I think you did?]

I pulled off my helmet. Emrys stopped mid-cackle to stare at me. Xolotl's eye ticked.

I smirked and spread my hands. "Are you sure about that?"

Emrys lunged at me. I sped backwards, almost tripping over that goon Izanami killed. I took to the air, floating just out of reach. Izanami held her scythe to the back of their necks to keep them from trying to escape.

Kagutsuchi showed up right after, keeping them trapped. Morigan dealt with the last of the goons, dragged Gideon over, and then we all waited there until the helicopter came to pick us up.

Then we went back to HQ. As far as I know, everyone but Ah Lam are locked up. We're waiting for their interrogation results to come back. Cecilia wouldn't let me be there while it happened, unfortunately. I wanted to gloat so hard. "Hey, you idiots, your hostage was a PubDef spy! Muahahaha!" But nope, she told me to stay out of it.

[The Vessel of the Vermillion Bird got away?]

Yeah...she ran off at some point while we were fighting. Gods know what she's up to. Well, not much we can do about it now, can we? We'll just have to wait for her to show up again.

[I suppose you're right. How is Emmanuel?]

He still hasn't woken up. Honestly, man...the infirmary isn't sure if he's ever going to wake up. They say there's a high chance his physical body is gonna sleep forever until he dies. He's just gonna have to go through life as a spirit...thing.

[...That's a shame.]

...Is there anything else I have to say about the mission, or are we done with this? I have stuff I need to do.

[What kind of stuff?]

Well, I have to go tell my parents why I disappeared for three days, for one.

End of transcript.

Second Place Fiction

Arianna Gargeau

How To Measure Grief

Day 17 - Activity Number One - Cooking

This morning I woke up with my alarm. Well, the third snooze, about 30 minutes after my original one, anyways. The sun shone through this morning; due to the blackout curtains that don't stay closed. It's different than usual today. The whole waking up thing. I feel my toes confront the plaid covers that don't match my pillow cases. My unshaven (and unshowered) legs through the holes of my too-short and too-dirty sleep shorts. What an odd feeling it is to be grounded from the waist down, but so up in the air from the neck up.

I always struggled as a kid. Do your homework, this; get out of bed, that. You know, it's not as easy as everyone makes it seem. I always envied the kids in the movies. It all seemed so easy to them. I always watched with wonder.

So you're telling me that you can't just...get out of bed that easily? Do your homework just like that? I could never.

So obviously it was no shock to my mother or father when the doctors decided I was depressed at my 14th yearly checkup. From there I simply lived with it; always living my days at a level 5.

"On a scale of one to ten, how happy are you feeling today?" they'd ask me at each annual checkup from then on.

"5," I'd say.

"Okay, and how about your sadness?"

"5."

The doctors would always ponder, "Hmmm...okay."

I was never really sure why they were so confused. It all felt so normal to me, living everything in black in white, in radio silence, in nothing at all. Depression is tricky like that; it feels like the most drastic measure and the most mundane innocence all at the same time. It's been eight years since the diagnosis and depression has continued to be a presence in my life, and most likely always will (so they say). Nothing but an imaginary friend that no one really understands. An imaginary friend that you'll never really understand either...

It only takes me 25 minutes to get from my bed to the kitchen today. 17 days into a “depressive” episode, I’d say that’s pretty good. I pass by the mirror in the hallway and steal a glance for the first time in a while. Yeesh. My eye bags are dark and large enough to carry the weight of my chest and the dragging of my feet.

I decided I could make breakfast today, inspired by the brief peek of the outside world my curtains gifted me today. The cabinets open with a screech as always, and I choose waffles for my mid-morning meal. They didn’t sound very appetizing but neither did lunch, dinner, or oxygen lately. I collect my ingredients from the fridge. The mental recipe recalls without struggle; wet ingredients: eggs, milk, oil; dry ingredients: flour, sugar, and a pinch of salt. I reach down to the glass jar of flour and measure out 1 ½ cups and pour it into my bowl. Next I measure the sugar and salt out. One cup and one teaspoon (if we’re being technical with the salt). I pour them into the bowl. Next, the eggs, milk, and oil. One egg, half a cup of milk, and one tablespoon of oil. Or was it half a tablespoon? Teaspoon? All of a sudden I can’t remember.

I stare into the drawer of measuring cups and spoons as I feel something behind me. Taking my best guess, I reach for the half tablespoon. I pause as the air shifts and I feel something grab my wrists. It holds them behind me, captive and stern. I look up at it, tall and disfigured. He stares at me, even better, right through me.

His voice booms and echoes like it’s inside me and all around me at once. Tightening around my wrists he whispers through the flow of air, “Stop that.”

I stay put, not turning to face him. Through side glances I could barely make him out. It seemed as if I could reach right through him. His complexion, fuzzy and uncertain, I wasn’t completely sure he was real at all. If I knew anything, however, it was that I couldn’t face him and couldn’t get him to let me go.

“What?” I whisper back.

He bends down next to my ear, his atmosphere touching mine. Still in his hushed tone, he repeats himself, “Stop that.” I close my eyes softly as the grip tightens.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Waffles,” I say, “I was making waffles.”

"No, you don't remember how," he says louder, declaring it to every part of me he can reach.

"I do, I make them all the time." I tug at my arms but they don't budge.

"I-I just need the tea- or, or tablesp- half..."

"No," he interrupts. "You don't remember how." It's definitive now. Stuck in place. Set in stone.

He stands consciously lifeless behind me, my wrists still handcuffed by his hands. If I could just reach in and grab the measuring spoon I could finish this. I could finish this and he would leave. I think through the steps again. Wet ingredients, dry ingredients, mix, pour, cook. Again. Wet ingredients, dry ingredients, mix, pour, cook. He holds on tight. Again. Wet ingredients, dry ingredients, mix...mix. No. Again. Wet ingredients, dry ingredients, mix. Next. Mix then... He stares a hole through me, his eyes stationary and blazing. Mix then what? What comes next?

My mind races as I whimper, "Please."

"It's okay, Hope. You don't remember how to make them."

"I don't remember. I can't."

"It's alright, there's no use"

"What?"

"There's no use."

"Why not?"

"It doesn't really matter anyway," he says, bent down to my ear again, whispering from behind.

"I don't understand"

"Hope, there's really no point, is there?" This rings through me like a bell. I acknowledge his grip one last time and try to think of the fourth step. It's my last hope. When it doesn't come to me I hang my head low. He straightens his neck to tower over me again and I feel the tears create a well of anger and frustration along my lash line. My body sinks as I absorb his atmosphere into mine.

"No," I respond. "There's really no point at all."

"Good. Now, go back to bed."

"Okay."

No amount of "snoozes" could get me out of bed the next morning.

Third Place Fiction

Annaliese Rowell

Step by Step

They say there are 5 stages of grief. Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. Each one leading to the next. Each one equally as hard as the last.

First there's denial. A refusal to believe anything happened at all. Convincing yourself that they're still there, or that the memories aren't all that's left.

The day after it happened I went to school. I was wearing my favorite pair of joggers and baggy Nike sweatshirt. It was the perfect length to hide my hands in the sleeves and my neck in the hood. Nothing felt wrong, not yet.

With every step I could feel people staring, like I was some zoo animal and they were waiting to see what trick I could do next. I think people were expecting me not to come, or at least for me to be a mess. And to be honest that's what I always expected too, but I wasn't. I can't explain it, I just wasn't.

"H-hey Noah," my friend Shawn said, hesitating, like he had to be careful around me. "Wasn't expecting to see you so soon, are you like, good?"

"I'm good." There was a surprising amount of energy in my voice as I said this. "Yeah, I'm good."

"Uh, nice man. I'm glad."

Normally there would have been some backhanded remark here, some way of making fun of me for being stupid or lazy, but it was genuine, like he cared.

I walk out of 3rd period, same as every other day, waiting for her, but she never comes. Yesterday, I turned the corner and saw her standing against the array of posters for drama club and the cliché "Practice Empathy; Be Kind." Or at least I thought I saw her. Standing by her locker, number 147, painted black with scratches from someone's keys, blue paint chipping through from the previous coat. I look around, to see if anyone else is seeing this, seeing her, but by the time I glance back over, she's gone. I'm just left there, in the middle of the hallway. Dozens of kids, walking around me, not even glancing over at me standing, staring blankly. Lost.

The bell rings, but I'm left there. At this point there's no else in the hallway; it's just me. And I begin to realize, that's how it is now; just me. She's not going to ask me for help on chemistry. She's not going to laugh with me at our kindergarten school pictures, where she looks adorable and I look like a scrawny dork. She's not going to have dinner at my house. She's not going to come back to locker 147. She's not going to come back to me.

Next, there's anger. A loss of control over your own emotions. There's anger at the person who died. Anger at yourself. Anger at those closest to you, just trying to help. Anger because there will be no future, and the past, just wasn't good enough.

"Hey man! How we doin'?" Luke says, as he walks up to me like the biggest, freakin' bro ever. He has his stupid, cliché letterman jacket draped across his back. His football jersey plasters the school's name right across his chest and his Jordan's match the jersey colors perfectly--just like every other stupid football jock in the school. He's clearly oblivious to what's gone down in the past week, and for some reason that really pisses me off. I want everyone else to hurt just as much as I do. I want them to realize that they were no help in keeping her alive either. That in some capacity this is all their fault too. They should be hurting too. So what follows is no surprise.

"Really? That's it? No 'sorry for your loss,' no condolences, nothing? Do you even know what happened or are you too wrapped up in the life of a jock that you can't open your eyes to the things that happen around you?" I blow up on him. I'm angry. I don't know why, I just can't stand that he's not going through the same pain I am. The same pain that she went through.

"Oh, damn dude. I-I'm sorry. I just kinda thought since you were acting fine that you just wanted to forget about it you know? Like we were okay."

"Oh, gotcha." I say, holding back the tears. At this point I'm just done. Done with him. Done with everyone else acting like they don't give a shit when they absolutely should, because this was our fault.

This anger is just consuming me. Taking control of every decision I make. Every bone in my body feels it. But it's a different kind of anger. Not anger like Mom asked me to do the dishes for the fourth night in a row. Not anger like you got a bad grade on a test. No, this anger is backed by hurt. By indescribable pain. The anger is my life now.

Why couldn't she just be alive? Why did she have to leave the party? She should have just stayed with me.

It's not her fault, but for some reason I'm blaming her. Like she had some role in her death and should be held responsible. But I'm mostly angry at myself. What kind of shitty person lets his friend die? I couldn't be there for her. I couldn't live up to what I should have been.

I can't let her be gone. I can't let the countless days on the playground in elementary school mean nothing. The dozens of times she came over for dinner. The silly faces we made to each other on FaceTime. She was my day-one. But I just wasn't good enough. She didn't deserve me. I failed her.

Bargaining follows anger. Constantly replaying how things could have happened differently. Or maybe should have happened differently.

I replay that night in my head. Going over each detail, changing it until she survives. I think of everything--anything--I could have done to keep her alive.

I could have told her she didn't have to go to that party--told her to stay home. I could have driven her home myself. I could have gone to her house; we could have had our own little party, just the two of us. I could have tried harder to get them not to drive. I could have called the cops on the party, had everyone leave before they got too drunk. I could have done more.

"Kaylee, please, just come to the party!" I laid on her bed, playing with her collection of Beanie Babies from 6th grade. Staring at the Justin Bieber posters plastering her walls.

"I don't know," her voice wavered, like she was waiting to tell me something, but the words just wouldn't come out. "I just kinda wanna stay home tonight, ya know?"

"But we'd have so much fun! Everyone's gonna be there!" I kept pushing. "Let's just go, even if it's only for a little while, and if you don't have fun, you can say 'I told you so,' promise."

"Ok. Fine."

We drove into the party at 9pm. People were already drunk. I told her to stick by me as I joined my football friends in the center of it all. Beer pong and corn hole happening around us. The smell of cheap Bud Light radiated off of the letterman jackets. I felt her energy change. She was uncomfortable. I thought she was just overwhelmed.

By 11pm things started to die down. Couples went into rooms to do God knows what. People started to trickle out and between the dancing and the games I didn't realize Kaylee was gone. I walked inside thinking maybe she'd just taken a break, but she wasn't there. I began to panic, thinking the worst.

Before I had time to look anywhere else, I heard it. Sirens. The piercing sound creeping through the streets. I jumped into my car, realizing only afterward I didn't even buckle my seatbelt. I drove down the road and there it was, the accident. Skid marks smeared across the road led my eyes to the dark green Honda Civic. Crumpled into the guardrail. Colin's Honda Civic. He was driving her home.

The paramedics were already there. Rushing over to the cars. Luke's car. He stumbled out of the driver's seat. Clearly drunk and high and who knows what else. But he was fine. Not even a scratch on his body. They guided him over to the ambulance then rushed back over to Colin. There was a passenger.

I couldn't see who it was, but I knew.

They pulled Colin out of the car. He was screaming. Asking if she was okay. And as soon as they pulled him out, I could see her. Kaylee. Bright red blood covered her face. She didn't even look that bad. But looks can be deceiving. They pulled the white sheet over her face and that was it. That was the last time I ever saw her.

The guilt consumes me. It's been almost 3 months now and I'm still thinking about every way I could have changed it. Every way I should have changed it.

Next is depression. When life loses all meaning. The sadness and longing overtake you as you can't imagine a life without them.

"Noah! You're gonna be late! You have to get up, let's go!" My mom's voice seeps through the crack under my locked door. Her footsteps become louder and panic rises in her words, almost as if she was expecting something to be wrong. "H-honey, come on, it's time for school. A-are you okay? Why aren't you answering me?"

I feel numb, heavy. I watch as my doorknob wiggles. I know she cares, but it feels fake. It all feels fake. I know she worries, but I don't think she should. I'm fine. I'll just keep saying I'm fine.

"Noah, open the door! I NEED you to open the door! Just say something, ANYTHING!" The panic has turned to fear. Fear of the worst thing a mother could think of.

"Mmm. I'm fine. How many times do I have to say that?" I walk up to my door. My feet dragging, reluctantly along the carpet. I open it just a crack. Just enough for her to see face.

She sighs outside my door. A sound of relief. "Honey." She's taken aback by my appearance. The faded Metallica sweatshirt I've been wearing for 3 days now, the tattered Nike sweats, my curly blond hair plastered to my head, a result of not showering in almost a week. "I think it's time we talk. I'm worried."

I don't fight it. I know it's bad. But I have no energy left to bother telling her not to worry. I have no energy left to do much of anything. I'm numb. I can't cry anymore. I can't laugh. I feel nothing. There are no more highs, no more lows. It's just this stagnant existence of...nothing.

My eyes gloss over as she talks. Her voice is muffled in my ear, almost as if I'm underwater.

"I know you don't want to, but I think it's time you talk to someone. Someone to help you through some of these tough feelings. What do you think? I can talk to Dr. Gordon, you've seen her before."

There's no response. For a moment, I almost forget she was talking. "Uh, yeah, sure. I guess." There's no energy in my voice. It's almost stale. I close my door and lie back in bed. Trying to feel something, anything. Even the pain would be better than whatever this is.

Finally, there's acceptance. The pain eases and you learn to live again. This does not come easy. There's hard work and healing, but eventually, you find peace.

I've been seeing Dr. Gordon for 3 weeks now. None of it's been easy, and I've uncovered some ugly truths about myself, but I've been healing.

"So you feel responsible, for Kaylee's death?" She says it like therapists do: no tone, no emotion, stating the obvious so you face the truth. "Why do you think that is?"

"Because I let her die! Isn't that obvious? It's all my fault. If she hadn't gone to that party, none of this would've happened. It started with me."

"Why do you think you wanted her to go so badly?" She was trying to get me to understand something--admit something maybe--but I couldn't.

"I guess I just wanted to share those memories with her. Everyone should have one good party memory. She's always stuck at home studying, so I thought it would be fun to get her to come out. I don't know. It was harmless."

"Okay, so you wanted her to have fun, but why did you push so hard? Why didn't you hear her when she said no?"

At that moment it hits me. I finally understand what I did. I finally understand why it's truly my fault. It was never about her going to the party. No. It was always about me wanting her to go to the party. Not for her, but for me. My need to control her, my need to obsess over her every move caused her death. She wanted to get away from me, from my constant looming over her. So she left. She got in his car, and drove off without me. She left me behind, forever.

I'll never see her again. My best friend will never tell me it's okay I failed my math test. She'll never laugh at my stupid jokes that aren't actually funny. She'll never threaten to shove me into her locker because I called her ugly. She'll never show up at my house just because she wanted to. She'll never make silly faces across the room making me smile when I didn't think I could. She'll never graduate high school. And it was all because of me.

Each session is hard, recounting my trauma. Trying to heal myself. But each time I share, the pain gets a little more manageable. It will never end, and I know that. Nothing will ever fill that hole in my heart. But I've learned that it doesn't need to be filled. I've learned to find peace. Some days are still harder than you can imagine, but they always end. There's always a brighter day ahead.

"Grief can be hard. I know it can. It's a lifelong battle. Learning to live a new truth, without your closest friend. But it gets better. I promise. That's what these sessions are for. Helping you understand how to move along. How to search deep within yourself for the strength to live when she can't. Live for her, if for no one else."

Somehow, Dr. Gordon just knew all the right words. She knew what I was feeling and the right things to make it better. I mean, I guess that's kind of her job, but still. She's right. This is new. And it's scary. But it does get better. There is another side to all this.

"Thank you. For everything." My last words as I walked out of Dr. Gordon's office.

First Place Nonfiction

August Bates

A Thank You Letter to the Ocean

Dear Ocean,

My father used to call me a fish because I swam so much. Every chance I could get to flap my little limbs around in the water, I would take. Lakes, rivers, oceans, the local YMCA—all of it was a place for me to find myself. The water was like a second home to me, wrapping me in an embrace that was all encompassing.

One week a year, in the middle of summer, me and my siblings and parents and grandparents rent a house in Maine for a week. When I was younger, it was a house called Neph. The house was huge, with six bedrooms and a connected living-kitchen-dining-room. I always got to sleep in my favorite room, The Crow's Nest, because it was a small room tucked in between the stairwell and the second story balcony. I don't remember a lot about the room, but I do remember that I would stay in there for hours on end, reading books to my heart's content and listening to the waves outside. The ocean was so close, it was like a friend whispering to me during the day and a soothing lullaby at night.

To get down to the ocean, we had to go down a long path. It took about five minutes, and there were three 'stages' to go through. The first was a stone path, surrounded by larger rocks. It would scratch against my feet as I stumbled down, leaving small white marks against the pads of my toes and pebbles in my heels. The second was what I could only consider a tiny jungle. There were trees that seemed to stretch forever upwards, leaves covering the ground and pine needles everywhere. I think I saw a snake there once, and I saw more than a few small mammals in the underbrush. I loved soaking in the dappled sunlight, smelling the slightly damp air even though it hadn't rained in days. It was more of a passing stage, connecting the first and third. The third stage was sandy, with prickly grasses growing out of the shallow soil, stinging against my ankles as I waded through it. I hated how my feet would sink in and I would have to shake them out, staying wary of the leg-biting weeds.

Finally I would end up at the beach, the real beach. Chasing the waves became a favorite activity, playing tag with the surf and

pretending every small disruption in the water was enough to send a boat crashing over. I would lay on my stomach and let the water wash over me, closing my eyes even though I had insisted on wearing goggles. I would gasp and cheer when I survived, like that was a surprise.

When I was a child, I fell in love with the ocean and her glittering surface and her salty tears and her gorgeous teal horizon. When I was a child, before I knew what love was, I had succumbed to it, riptide dragging me under all at once. When I was a child, I created crab claw staffs and seashell jewelry and pretended that I was going to live there forever, that I would die on the white sands while the sea washed over my waning body.

My final year there was when I was nine. I left the house on a Thursday, waving goodbye. My parents had already told me it was getting too expensive to come back, so I waved knowing I wouldn't see it again for a long while, if ever. I can picture the peeling white walls and squeaking door, but even those memories are decaying with time.

The next year we went to a different house. I have one distinct memory from that place. It was a few days before we left, and I woke up extremely early. Fog hung low over the lake we bordered, and the smell of pine and dew drifted through the air. I sat in an armchair on the open air porch, blanket draped lazily over my shoulders. The book in my lap was halfway done when I started reading, and I finished it that morning. My grandfather cooked us all breakfast and me and him ate while I read the finishing pages, waiting for anyone else to wake up and join us.

I think about that a lot, even though we didn't go back to that place. It seemed so simple, to sit on the porch in silence and fall into another world. I wish I could go back and do it again sometimes. I swam less that year, opting to stay in the house. Lakes and oceans were different, one was a mystery filled with weeds and small fish while the other, a haven.

The next place was a few years later, a small cottage called the Sea Witch. I liked it there, even if the doors creaked too loudly and the bathroom was freezing at night. The beach was rocky and I was obsessed with finding the perfect stones, ones smoothed by the spray so they wouldn't poke at my palms when I picked up too many. Stones speckled with dark freckles, striped brown and red, soft cyan and green sea glass that I willed not to cut me when I held it.

It was a week I only have snippets of. I read the Hunger Games for the first time, swam little, and walked a lot. My sister and mom would lay in the hammock outside and I would take their pictures. It was a whirl of Candy Crush and mud sculptures and scratchy blankets. Most of my family didn't like the house, for different reasons, but I remember it fondly. Something about the small cottage made me happy in a way I can't describe, and leaving was melancholy.

I didn't swim much that summer. I couldn't find joy in it anymore, for whatever reason. The sea went from inviting to scornful. I didn't like the way the bathing suits hugged my body, showing off every curve and extra flab. I think it was that summer I cut my hair short, just above my ears and tickling the back of my neck. I rejected invitations to return to the water, huddling up in the small bedroom I had once again claimed as my own and turning page after page after page. Waves of words passed through my mind, distracting me from the horrors in the world I had learned about. I would listen to the words at night to help me fall asleep, constantly forcing myself to be somewhere else.

The past four summers, I have changed. We have gone to the same house every time, somewhere we had all settled into. The house is simple and small. I sleep on the upstairs daybed, above the blankets, because it gets hot during the summer. In the morning I eat horrendous cereal, disgusting flavors advertised throughout stores. I don't mind that much. I find the hammock outside—a different hammock, but a hammock all the same—and I lay in it. I walk in the sand and the woods and the grass and anywhere I want. I pretend I am not who I am, if merely for a moment. I pretend I am happy. If I try hard enough, the pretending fades away.

I return a new person every time, with new experiences and new friends and even a new name. I learned to love and hate myself, one more than the other. I learned to climb cliffs and leave footprints in the woods and roast marshmallows and play D&D. I learned that I can be anyone I want to be, and the world will accept me as I am. I learned that I don't need to cling to the person I once was, because he is not me, and I am not him.

It is being sold this year. Next year I will go somewhere else, somewhere I need to reintroduce myself to the knotted wood and the sand. I will sleep under unfamiliar blankets. There will be a different way to get to the beach, whether it be through a grassy lawn or a wooded jungle. The kids I played with for four years will not be there, the silence just another inconsistency. But the water

will be there, the same as before, looking for the love that was there so many years ago.

I swam once at the house that doesn't belong to me anymore. The water was too cold, and I grew disdainful. It's not a joy to wrap myself in the embrace of the sea anymore. I have fallen out of love with the sea, and reposed the feelings somewhere that makes me feel guilty. I strive for the days where I could lie in the spray and waves and just be, create the smaller version of myself once more and become him again. Become the small child who would wear a bathing suit in the car and rush through the rocks and the jungle and the itchy weeds to the beach.

Sometimes we feel like two different people. We don't share a name, a body, or a brain. We don't share wants and needs and friends. I don't know him anymore, but he exists somewhere inside me.

I let the ocean swallow me and hope it rubs away at the edges, smoothing me out like sea glass and making something I can handle without fear of cuts. I let my feet collect sand in hopes it reminds me of shells and crab claws. I listen to the waves crash and fear that I will never be who I was again, and a small part of me, soft as the faint smell of dew, tells me that's okay.

Thank you.

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Second Place Nonfiction

Annaliese Rowell

When You Bother About Giraffes

As I sat at the red, “u-shaped” table in Mrs. Nichols’ first grade classroom, surrounded by classmates, I heard her words ring in my ears: “You will get a prize tomorrow if you make a list of words with both hard and soft g’s to practice our letter sounds.” My eyes lit up. The rest of the day, I could not focus on fossils or addition facts; words such as garage and giraffe swirled through my mind. I rode the bus home, writing words on the fog building on the windows. I raced down the driveway, unaware of the cold, wet, snow seeping through my sneakers.

“Dad, Dad! I need a piece of paper please. Now!”

I threw my backpack against the stairs, ignoring the pencils and folders spilling from the top. I grabbed my favorite red marker and began writing.

Giraffe

Garage

Gang

Geek

Gray

Grain

Gem

Gentleman

Genius

Gingerbread

Gymnastics

Game

Gate

Glow

Gap

Germ

The list went on.

I folded my piece of paper precariously into thirds, scoring the edges on the table for precision. I was proud of my work. I could barely wait to walk into school that morning.

As we returned to the red, “u-shaped” table, I exuberantly displayed my comprehensive list of g-words. I waited for my classmates to share my excitement, but to my surprise no one else presented any lists. I was confused. As a mere first grader, learning was all I knew. I thrived on knowledge. I felt sad for my classmates. Not because they didn’t receive the TinkerBell sidewalk chalk I did, but because they didn’t learn their g-words.

We boarded the bus to attend the most coveted field trip of third grade: Fort Number Four. As I got comfortable in my seat, squished next to my best friend, I rummaged through my backpack ensuring I packed everything I needed.

Water Bottle--Check!

Lunchbox--Check!

Pens and Pencils--Check!

Notebook--Check!

I couldn’t forget my notebook.

Little did I know, my friends’ backpacks were not filled with school supplies for this trip, but rather with snacks or iPads.

As we walked throughout the field trip, my notebook pages were filled with the steps to churn your own butter or the unwritten rules of bartering. I guess I never realized I was the only one taking notes until the blacksmithing booth.

Heat metal

Form into nail

As I glanced from my workbook, I noticed the other kids pointing to the funny-looking dresses across the street, or picking their noses. Nowhere did I see another student with a pencil in hand. I was confused why other kids didn’t care about blacksmithing; why they weren’t interested in learning.

The seat of my school desk felt cold and hard against my back. I sat eagerly in the front row, notebook open on my desk, pen ready in my hand. However, the words spoken from my teacher’s mouth did not match my energy.

“The AP Exam will be in May. My job is to teach you everything you need to know to be prepared for that exam.”

I was told that in high school I would have freedom over my classes. I would be able to take courses that challenged me and catered toward my level of knowledge and excitement. But that's not what this was at all. This was another teacher teaching to another test. No application. I felt my pencil drop from my hand and my eyes glazed over.

All my life I wanted to learn. Not to know all of the things for the test, not to show off my shiny resume when I'm thirty years old, but to change. From those days in first grade, until those months before graduation I have been told highschool will prepare you for your future. But right now it doesn't. It's all about the competencies. These things people have been preaching since we were in elementary school: "Highschool is your groundwork for success!" and, "Pay attention in class or you'll never make it in the real world!" or even, "You'll never make it without a college degree!" are utterly contradictory to the way high school functions today. We are all numbers on a screen, checking boxes.

Can student number 22 from class AX704 score above the 80th percentile on this test?

No?

Back to the drawing board. This student clearly didn't learn anything.

Little did they know this student wasn't scoring high because he was volunteering at a soup kitchen after school and working the night shift to provide food for his family. He was choosing real world applications and conversations with teachers outside of school over worksheets printed off by the thousands for mindless repetition. He was choosing to change who he was from the inside out.

Most students settle for mindlessly repetitive worksheets. Or maybe don't even turn their work in at all. Most students don't care how their in-class reading of Socrates will apply to their life after highschool, or better yet, in highschool. I am not most students. I bother. I bother enough to put up with the worksheets and the competencies, but also to find the application. I bother enough to put all of my effort into a class presentation my teacher dozed off to 3 minutes in.

I still don't know why those other kids didn't sit down at home to write their list of g-words. I don't know why I was the only kid to take notes at The Fort Number Four. I don't know why I choose to bother. What I do know is highschool can prepare you for the future, but only if you bother enough to let it.

Third Place Nonfiction

Harper B. Hoglund

C Is For Coughing

I woke up in a dark cold tent with my friends laying in sleeping bags around me. The only things I could see was my hand faintly resting on my sleeping bag and soft light traveling through the tent from the sunrise. I looked up and saw that the door to the tent was opened and gently blowing in the wind. I flinched to the sound of someone coughing. No, that didn't sound right. It was more than that. A different sound. I was about to find out the hard way where the noise was coming from. I slumped back into my sleeping bag to sleep, but I couldn't. It didn't feel right. After a few minutes, the tent started to reek of rotting meat and food. The smell lingered in the back of my throat and I tasted the dragon breath tang you get after waking up from a burden of sleep. I covered my nose with the tip of my shirt, my imagination getting the better of me. The tent door was still swaying in the cold brush of the wind, the flap wide open to the elements. What is up with this smell? I thought, What is it? Why can't I put my fing- I heard footsteps. Something was in the tent! I moved ever so slightly hoping whatever this was would believe I was still asleep. I saw a dark shadowy figure standing in the doorway.

"Shh!" someone whispered across the tent. Was I not the only one awake? I felt relieved that I was not the only one seeing this, but why were they talking? Didn't they realize they were compromising us? I reached over to grab my flashlight, knocking water bottles, books, and granola bars down. I swung my hand around for a few seconds and found the rubber grip of the flashlight.

I grabbed it, and shined the light at the mysterious figure.

It was my friend, Masy.

With a pale-looking expression on her face, she moaned and held her stomach tightly. She was clammy and zombie-like, her cheeks red and bloated. She ran outside. There was that coughing sound again!

Suddenly, I started to think. I zoned off, my eyebrows furrowed. I took a deep breath and...

I slithered back into my sleeping bag, my hands clutching the fabric encasing my body. I started gasping for air, my eyes widened with fear. My friend had the bug! I had never been so scared to hear the sound of gagging in my life. My heart was pounding more than before.

"I have to get out of this nightmare," I told myself, but I couldn't. I was wide awake, and there was no going back. "Why me?" I grunted to myself from inside my sleeping bag.

I had to tell the counselors, but I wouldn't let myself go near the throw-up, so I got out of my sleeping bag and made my way to the door to the opposite side of the contaminated tent. Unsettlingly, my snoring friend Ceceley was laying snugly right up in front of the zip-up door, blocking the way. I was determined to get out of the infected tent, so I squatted down and held my breath, found the zipper to the door, and slowly crouched over her to unzip the tent. I felt like I was playing Twister over a pot of lava, my head dripping with sweat.

I yanked the zipper up, ZZZEEERRRSSPPPP!

Only, the zipper hit a snag.

I could only fit a finger through the hole, which meant that the zipper was broken! I used all the strength in my arms to force the zipper door open. I swiftly pulled my arm up, lost my balance and clunk, I fell on Ceceley.

It was a soft fall, but still, she could wake up, start screaming at me, then my zombie-like friend, Macy, could come in and barf all over me. I sat there motionlessly, my body heavy upon my friend. Don't move, don't move, don't move I told myself, but nothing happens; if anything, My hibernating friend Ceceley was snoring louder than before. That's when I knew I would be fine.

Still, I needed to consider the infected germs hovering around the tent. I didn't want to get sick. I stumbled over the sleeping bodies piled up in the tent and reached my sleeping bag. I slid my body back inside. That's when I heard the coughing sound again. I covered my ears with my hands, my heart was pounding out of my chest. It was too late. My stomach lurched to the thought of vomit and my heart skipped a beat. My life was basically flashing before my eyes. I tried a breathing technique.

List 4 things you can see: I can see my friends, sleeping bag, my hand, my shirt.

List 3 things you can hear: Snoring, the wind, the coughing sound.

List 2 things you can smell: My breath and the.... The.

List 1 things you ca-

This was clearly not helping. I knew what I had to do. I had to be brave.

I stepped out of my sleeping bag, shaking. Although I couldn't let the threat of illness take over my life, I puffed out my chest and stood tall. I climbed over sleeping people until I reached the door. The sun was peeking through the trees, so I had enough light to see. And there laying in front of me outside of the door was a big, odd puddle of multicolored liquid. I took a deep breath. Then I did something that I never thought I'd do, I stepped over the throw up and safely made it to the counselors tent. There, shivering from the cold and fear, I told them what had happened. They told me I would be fine but I thought differently.

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ABOUT THE CFA

The Center for the Arts (CFA) mission is to enrich lives by supporting, promoting, and connecting literary, performance, and visual artists of all ages to our communities.

We achieve our mission through a variety of initiatives, including year-round art classes such as music instruction, a year-round gallery and studio that showcases the unique talents of our artists and craftspeople, ongoing Free First Friday showcases highlighting artistic talent and local organizations, summer exhibits for artists and craftspeople, entertaining arts events for the community, family and student activities and contests, art scholarships, and more.

We serve the 12 towns of Andover, Bradford, Danbury, Grantham, New London, Newbury, Newport, Springfield, Sunapee, Sutton, Warner, and Wilmot but also reach beyond these locations to bring a high level of arts excellence to the region.

Our vision is to see a Lake Sunapee Region where artists of all disciplines enrich their community. Come create with us or experience the many arts programs, classes, and events that are available through this vibrant Center for the Arts!

The CFA believes in supporting artists of all ages. In this Teen Writers Project, the top winners of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry are selected and published. An award ceremony is arranged, and the community is invited.

This and other programs, like our artist scholarship program, as well as upcoming enrichment classes in the arts, music, and family arts activities, all help young people tap into their creativity and discover more about their abilities and passions.

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