Podium RVA provides the space, resources, and listening ears for youth in our community who have so much to say. With writing workshops, self-advocacy lessons, and communication-based programs for middle and high school students, Podium is a critical asset in Richmond that helps youth to realize their truest selves and identify the power of their voice. They say that once you become a part of the Podium family, you never truly leave, and thank goodness for that!

My sophomore year of high school, I started participating in Podium’s workshops, and it was the most positive choice I made during that time of my life. The mentors leading the workshop encouraged me not only to be myself, but to write how I truly felt. It was through these sessions I gained a deeper understanding of who I was, what I wanted, and what I deserved.

I became so invested in the program that I began to volunteer with the organization in several ways. From graphic design, to helping lead workshops, Podium became a huge part of my life. It was through the guidance of people at Podium that I discovered what I truly wanted to study in college, and it was with them where I truly developed a sense of professionalism and accountability.

Which brings us to now. College is behind me, and I have a degree in Mass Communications from Virginia Commonwealth University. While I’m sad to see my time there go, I have endless optimism for what my future holds. I have been given such a unique opportunity, and I am so thankful. My mentors and leaders have turned into peers and friends, and I just started my internship at Podium RVA this spring.

Although my primary focuses are social media and graphic design, I also have the distinct pleasure and responsibility of working with youth in the same programs that helped to shape me during my formative years. I find it a blessing to be able to see programs from the other side and to have the opportunity to encourage and build our future leaders in the same way I was.

As you read the following publication, please consider the lives of every individual who wrote these pieces. They have dreams, aspirations, desires, hurts, and needs. I promise you, with your support of Podium’s programs, you are making a positive difference, not only in the lives of these young people, but throughout our entire community. Thank you and enjoy!

- Aerin Mills, Podium RVA Alum and Communications Intern
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Envision Your Future
Olivia Bell Ferguson
Thomas Jefferson High School

What do you envision in your future? That’s not too hard to answer. In my dreams, I envision being a successful businesswoman. My chauffeur drives me to work every day, where I earn millions of dollars each year. He drives me back to my gorgeous mansion. No need for a white picket fence when I own a hundred acres. My personal chef has my dinner prepared for me as soon as I walk through the door. My kids attend the best private schools in the country. They both want to go to Harvard, but I tell them Yale is also a very suitable option. They never have to struggle for anything the way I did.

And then, I open my eyes, I understand that kind of future will probably be unrealistic for me. And although money is essential to life, life is not about money. Even if I could bring in millions of dollars every year, I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night knowing that there are people in the world who don’t have homes or food or clothes, while my small family of four is living in a twelve-bedroom castle. I might not be able to change the world, but I can change the lives of those around me.

I hope to become a successful businesswoman who collaborates with several non-profit organizations that give back to communities. I want to help improve the lives of those who need it. So, when it comes to the question, “What do you envision for your future?” I have to stop right there. It isn’t just my future that’s hanging in the balance here. It’s everyone’s future. If we wish to move forward as a society, we have to think beyond ourselves. We have to invest in our fellow citizens and work together to create a world where no one has to worry about where their next meal will come from, or where they will be sleeping that night. The future of our world is up to us. We have the power to change the world.

Super Glue
Jaila Blue
John Marshall High School

There are so many stereotypes thrown out every day, and people don’t know the words they say stick to us, and it’s like super glue, Hard to get off.

People don’t understand it until it happens to them,
then they realize what they’ve done,
then they know it’s too late
(or it might be too late.)

Not everyone takes words the same way.
We release the pain in our own ways,
Some cut, some stay, and some feel like it will never go away.

We carry the weight of what’s been said and done to us.
It gets heavier and heavier
each time someone does something mean or ruthless.

We must take some of that weight off,
weaken the super glue
of the othering things that people say.
Me Too

Xavier Adkins
Thomas Jefferson High School

In a world of foxes, is there really any room for sheep?
So out of place with their curious balls of fur
In a world of wolves who poke and prod, but a sheep
can’t make a peep.
Today is the day those sheep are saying enough.

Foxes aren’t the only beasts with a roar,
Sheep are tired of being told they are mere prey.
Now’s the time to make a sound and shake the foxes
to the core.
The sheep are roaring their roar, and foxes better pray
Because the sheep aren’t just seeking justice,
They’re reaching out to the docile foxes, and their goal
is just in range.

Now it’s not just the sheep roaring their powerful roar,
Even docile foxes are coming out to scream too.
The foxes can no longer look at this as a mere chore
Because a change is coming soon,
And now they realize their preachers were untrue.

A social change is more than just foxes, and there are
more of us than them.
It’s about awakening others from their sleep
Because now, the future isn’t looking as grim.

Slam Dunk

Laron Mitchell
John Marshall High School

Basketball became my favorite sport on the day I saw
LeBron James and Michael Jordan dribble the ball up and
down the court. I remember watching Space Jam while
eating skittles when I was little. On that day, I went to the
basketball court in the neighborhood, excited to work on my
shot. But then, I remembered seeing Jordan dunking the ball,
and I realized that instead, I wanted to take flight.

Over and over again, I ran as fast as I could and jumped
as high as I ever had before, but I couldn’t make the dunk.
I just didn’t understand. Why could I not dunk or shoot like
Jordan? Discouraged, I went home and told my mom what
happened, and she told me to learn and to practice. I asked
her, “What is practice?”

“It’s something you do over and over again until you get it
right.”

The next day, my mom and I went to the court together to
practice. We were there for what felt like hours, and I didn’t
feel like doing it all day. I told my mom that I wanted to quit
and give up, but she said right back to me, “Don’t ever give
up your dreams.” I listened to her, didn’t stop trying my best,
and eventually, I was able to shoot better and even dunk. All
you need is motivation and a little support to keep chasing
your dreams.

Just Think About It

Daquan Coleman
Armstrong High School

Some group of boys
were ready get themselves
into some crazy stuff.

I told my home boy,
Think before you do it.
There’s gonna be consequences,
if you go, like... you got a family to take care of.
I know you don’t want your mom crying,
knowing you behind them bars.

He thought about it
and then changed his mind.
Acceptance

Lovely Cato-Chang
Huguenot High School

Tyler and Joey have been dating for six years.
Joey is a homosexual male,
and Tyler is a transgender male,
but Joey doesn't know.

Tyler was originally female until starting his transition
and became his true self a year before meeting Joey.
Now today, on their 6th anniversary,
Tyler is going to tell Joey his secret.

As dinner came along, Tyler became nervous.
Incredibly nervous.
So nervous, he just blurted it out of nowhere
"I'm female to male trans!"
Joey took a moment, then looked at him and said,
"Is this supposed to change my love for you? Because it won't."

Tyler sits there speechless,
Joey accepted him.

Mixed Emotions

Jasmine Nicholls
Armstrong High School

My tears were like rain
With hate that felt like a permanent stain
Where laughter faded into crying
And where it almost felt like my heart was dying.
As my hope crumbled, faith in myself slowly tumbled over the edge
But rather than talking, I cried instead.
Day became night,
But still I could feel something
It had to have been fright.
Should I get some help?
I just might.

Because I'm a Black Female

Patricia Powell
Mayor's Youth Academy

Because I'm a black female, I can't speak my mind.
I'm supposed to act like I'm blind
And ignore the fact that y'all are committing hate crimes
That happen in the daytime but never in the nighttime when it's showtime.

Because I'm a black female, I'm supposed to wear weave.
No, I'm not going to grieve
But best believe
I promise you with all these stereotypes, I'm still going to achieve.

I will perceive and deflect any negativity,
I maintain my peace and pursue all adversity,
I’ll take my natural hair and get my degree
At a university.

Or what? Does my natural black hair intimidate you?
Boo-hoo! Now, because you don't have a clue
What to do,
Just call the cops like you usually do.

Because I'm a black female I'm supposed to be pregnant in high school
Well I'm sorry I don't abide by your rule,
I'm a black female, and I will be treated like a
Jewel.
Surviving the Teenage Years: Podium Internship Reflection

Yah'mata McPhearson
Mayor's Youth Academy

The definition of mentorship is empowerment and leadership. Empowerment is having the ability to uplift people who need it, and leadership is being able to take charge and show initiative when it is required or recommended. The relationship between these three words is that they all have to do with bettering something; they are all positive words. Empowerment and leadership fall under the category of mentorship. Mentorship is important, not only because of the knowledge and skills that youth can learn from mentors like us, but also because mentoring provides a professional connection between the mentor and the mentee. A mentor can greatly increase the youth's chances of success.

One skill that I feel confident in as a peer mentor to others is my ability to connect and understand without judgement. If you plan on being a mentor, then judging others and stereotypes should be thrown out the window. Being a mentor is a privilege that not everyone gets to witness, and it should be treated like it's the most priceless thing in the world. It feels essential to know that what you are doing with youth will most likely have a positive impact on them later.

To me “Surviving the Teenage Years” means being able to overcome all of the complications that life throws at you while you’re under the age of 20. Overcoming a lot of life's hardships is very hard, and yes, you're going to want to give up at times. Three pieces of advice I would give to a thirteen-year-old who is just becoming a teenage fall under the topics of self-love, relationships, and family.

Self-love is the best love, and that's well known. Nobody can love somebody else who doesn't first love themselves. You have to make sure that you are well taken care of, fed, and groomed before you can start to impress someone with yourself. When you get to middle and high school, you are going to realize that boys aren't as nasty as they used to be in elementary school. Boyfriends and girlfriends will come and go, and so will regular friends, but as long as you love yourself, you will always be happy.

This leads me to relationships. Now, relationships don't necessarily have to do with boyfriends and or girlfriends. It could be a friendship or you having to deal with peer relationships. I'm going to tell you now that no teenage relationship is going to be perfect. If you think it's going to last for a long time or want it to, just remember to never settle for less than what you deserve. Don't let anybody run over you or pressure you into doing something you don't want to do. Stay true to yourself while also paying attention to toxic traits.

Lastly, there is family. As you are becoming a teen, parents are going to be on your case more and more. For example, like saying no more hanging out with the opposite sex as much as you did when you were younger because you are growing, and they know your hormones are as well. Remember that they are just trying to look out for you, and trust me, I know they can be a headache. Deal with them in a healthy way and learn from their mistakes. Do you want to be just like them, or better?
Watt I’ve seen

Christopher Oliver
Thomas Jefferson High School

My eyes are not very good, but the things your eyes show you
is what you see, and not everything you see you know.
My mind is wide like a desert,
and I’m eating what the world is feeding me.
Interpretation and knowledge are my dessert.
I refuse to be a statistic and will change the statistics
so every neuron in my brain I exert.
My mind’s a predator for info.
It sneaks up to catch the tempo,
to understand a system’s flow,
to find out what I don’t know.
So I watch and I listen to find out what’s here, what’s missing
through actions, words, and repetition.
You’ll see one’s true intention.

An old man encouraged me to write this, and he was very sharp.
He said he wants to see this somewhere, so immediately I began to start
from wattle I’ve seen in a world of blind and greed.
I couldn’t even put it all in one piece, know what I mean?
There are people who want to sow but don’t want to reap,
but that’s always coming whether you do or don’t want to.
No matter how many layers you put up, karma will seep
through and make sure you get what’s been due.
That luck you’ve been desperately clinging on to
won’t be there to save you.
No, you might not be caught lacking, but every dog has its day.
Especially when the wolf is caught by the sheep.

You have the givers, people whose hearts are continuously broken,
whose feelings are constantly crushed by words spoken
but never change a thing about themselves. Their morals are a token
that the world wants to label as weak. Now let that sink in.
There are also those who just want to be accepted.
The outcasts of society who just want all eyes to see
and accept who they really want to be.
To encourage others to just throw the shackles off and be free.

Last but certainly not least, there are the type of people who sit
on the cool side of the fan. Who look down on those who sit
behind where the air is sucked out without a doubt in themselves.
They only care about themselves because
they’re always going to have water in this drought.
I used the old man’s sharp explanation of watts being a unit of power.
That’s why it’s not “what” but instead “w, a, double T”
so it’ll be more accurately
a gauge of power behind watt I mean.
Because these traits in people are watt I’ve seen.
Not a Rapper

Omar Yancey
John Marshall High School

McFlurry from McDonalds,
That’s cold.
Kids from Burger King,
That’s old.
Sitting in a chair in school,
But I’m not a fool.
Pink Jacket on Halloween
Went home to watch Planet Sheen.
But I’m not a rapper.

Still got my box TV walking in
To a 10-million-dollar mansion,
And I’m rich.
Went to the movies
And watched Lilo and Stitch.
But I’m not a rapper,
I’m a poet.

Understanding Autism

Graciela Alexander
Mayor’s Youth Academy

December 23rd, 1999, a baby girl named Amya was born. There was barely any known family history of mental illness, or learning/developmental issues, so when she was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (also known as ASD), her family was in shock, and for a while, in denial. At a young age, people who don’t know what Autism is would have said that she was just very mischievous. Since Amya is nonverbal, she cannot tell her caretakers how she’s feeling, so distinguishing the difference between her throwing a tantrum and having a meltdown is challenging. It’s just easy to assume that she is being defiant.

One day, Amya and her family were on the way to the beach. Before they left, they packed snacks and lunch to eat while there. Usually, Amya and her little sister were allowed to eat one snack before they ate a meal. Amya saw a pack of cookies being packed and was determined to get every last one. Her mother tried to console her by telling her that she would get some once they got to the beach, but Amya began to get more and more frustrated. She didn’t understand why she couldn’t just get them all at that moment, and this led to her having a meltdown in the car the whole way to the beach.

Once the family stepped foot on the beach, and they saw the crystal-clear water, Amya’s mood began to lighten. Water kept her relaxed and calm, especially when she was overwhelmed like she was then. Amya ran to the water, but her mother caught her and told her to wait until everybody else was ready. She did not like what her mom told her and continued to point to the water, signaling that she wanted to get in. After much reassuring, Amya listened and walked back to the area where her family started setting up their food and umbrella. But, along the way, she began to kick the sand aggressively and hit her head. People gave her scared and judgmental looks, but she did not care and continued with her frustration. Amya’s little sister saw how upset she was and ran to give her a hug to calm her down.

Amya started to smile and then got even more excited as soon as she saw the cookies being brought out again. Amya’s father pulled out two baggies, one for her and one for her little sister, and filled each with chocolate chip cookies. As soon as he handed the cookies to the girls, they began to hurriedly eat them, so they could both go into the water to play.

For the rest of the day, Amya played with her sister, each splashing each other and laughing nonstop. Occasionally, Amya made an outburst to express how happy she was, and the people around who didn’t understand just stared, but she couldn’t have cared less. She was having the time of her life.

Amya is different, but that’s what makes her Amya, and her family wouldn’t change her for the world. Despite her challenges, she is a bright ray of sunshine to everyone she encounters. Patience is what everyone who has family or friends with Autism needs to have and practice every day. Just imagine what it’s like when, no matter how hard you try, you are never able to say with words how you feel. That is Amya’s life. Sometimes, we fail to realize that despite someone having a disability, they still have feelings. We need to be careful how we treat people and try to understand why they’re behaving the way they do.
A Statement on Love

Shacorie Jones
Armstrong High School

Love,
A strong word.
It can be one sided,
but also beneficial.

One particular day I met someone.
I don't remember the weather,
But it had to be beautiful.

For me to meet him, my love.
I didn't know what love was
Or how it felt
Until I met him.

He brightened up my night and days,
Helped me when I needed it.
I felt as if I was on top of the world,
As if I was alive.

I loved it.
I loved him...

Then it started.
The arguments,
Trust lost,
Miscommunication.

It went on for some time.
They started to get heated,
But one day,
A light shined onto their relationship.

They realized fighting was pointless.
I needed him,
I loved him,
And he loved me.

All of a sudden,
That oh so great feeling came back
of being on top of the world.
That aliveness, how I love that feeling!

And to this day, it still goes on.
Whenever I'm around him
I get butterflies
and wish this feeling would stay forever!
On a Sunday

Kesha Rerah
John Marshall High School

A banker is dead from what appears to be a robbery gone wrong. There are three suspects and only one clue – a gun – but the fingerprints have been wiped away. All three suspects have alibis:

His wife stated, "I was with my therapist."
His side chick said, "I was home asleep."
His daughter shared, "I was getting the mail."

Who is guilty?

Honey

Maryjane Perkins-Lynch
Thomas Jefferson High School

Honey

How intoxicating it is.
It brings me to my knees.
How the thought of you fills my heart with honey.
It seeps on my tongue.
It's like being high, but with much worse side effects.
You make my heart glow,
and I want you to know with every fiber of my being.
But if I confess, you might run,
cut ties, and if you say yes, I'll own everything in my delirious, honey intoxicated state.

So I am silent.
Content to let my heart flutter within thick golden bubbles.
Content to watch you with golden eyes
and a good soaked heart,
drowning in the honey of my dreams. My dreams of calling you Honey.
Cats

J'ai Besoin'd’aide
Armstrong High School

Cats, oh how they stare.  
My cats, the best ones out there.  
Mom wants them gone, but I detest.  
Mom says they must go, but I protest.  
With three of them, they're a great expense.  
They're my kids, so you see, I can't let them go.  
They're family, and my mom has got to know.  
I need to keep them, I really do,  
But if things go her way, this will be proven untrue.  
They're all I have left in this world, my wealth,  
And without them, I'll just be a husk of my former self.  
My ferocious feline army will deplete until I am nothing.  
She'll have my cats swept out for her to bring  
In that canine calamity she calls "another dog."  
Losing them would be my downfall.

Zombies

Miranda Russell  
Thomas Jefferson High School

When people think of zombies  
they think, rotting flesh,  
brain-dead, and careless.  
But there could be a universe  
with wildly intelligent zombies and zombie politicians.  
Hell, even zombie vegans:  
They'd only eat red meat.  
Zombie politics would be wild, and  
of course, they'd be concerned about global warming too,  
but maybe not in the same way.  
One of their solutions would force humans to go extinct.  
Humans are the ones creating the problems, after all.
{Joey Drew Studios - Joey Drew's Office. Feb 10th, 1931}

[In his office, Joey Drew walks back and forth in front of his desk. It is clear something is bothering him.]

JOEY: [To himself] Ugh, everything’s slipping out of my control. The company has been in debt for a while now, and it’s getting harder to keep everyone in line. Those back room incompetents have even started spreading vile rumors that will make everyone leave. I can’t let that happen. Not when I’m this close. I need to make them trust in my leadership.

[Joey stops in his tracks and turns his head to look at the poster of his creation, Bendy, which reminds him of the inky smiling abomination that is now locked away deep underground. He makes a disgusted face at the thought.]

JOEY: I don’t know what kind of freak abomination Tommy and the boys at Gent made, but that is not my glorious creation. I’m going to have to try again soon... Tommy says that thing is there because of its lack of a soul. If that’s all there is to it, then there won’t be any issue with the next test. I own every soul in this blasted place! I’ll sacrifice any of them to make this possible.

[Joey grins to himself, turning on the microphone and begins speaking in the theatrical, charasmatic voice he always uses.]

JOEY: It’s been said that dreaming can make it so! And, my friends, it has! 1931 is going to be an amazing year in Joey Drew Studios! We’re growing. Knocking out a few walls, putting in some new desks, and collecting the finest talent money can buy! Nothing is too good for my studio family! So what can you expect for the coming months? Well, I can’t say much. Just too many secrets been cooked up in the kitchen. But what I can say is that big things are coming! Also, a small memo to all administration offices: Rumors have begun to fly that we simply can’t tolerate any longer! The idea that the company is in some form of financial difficulty is untrue, and a slanderous lie against us. It’s also been known to me that some backroom incompetents are not trusting in my leadership. As a leader, I’m always steering the boat, guiding our destiny. Looking at the big picture. No need for you people to worry about such complicated things. Just do whatever it is you do and trust your leader. ...which is me. I can assure you that massive things are coming! You just watch... At Joey Drew Studios, we’re going to bring dreams...to life.

{Joey Drew Studios - Break Room.}

[On stage: Sammy Lawrence, the music director, and Wally Franks, the janitor.]

SAMMY: [sighs with annoyance] Does he ever shut up? The only other annoying thing besides him is that stupid cartoon character.

[Sammy glances at the “Bendy” character on the poster, still annoyed. Wally shakes his head.]

WALLY: Hey, it’s not that bad. ‘Sides, Joey’s Joey. He’s always yammerin’ about “growing” and all that jazz.

SAMMY: And yet, he does nothing but continues letting everything spiral out of control. You’ve heard the rumors about the company going into debt. The fact that he’s trying to tell us it’s just rumors proves that it’s true. And what has he done? Continues to claim that we’re “growing” and keeps working with that foul ink. What does he even need all that for anyway?

WALLY: I heard it was for that, um, weird “Ink Machine” thing. Guy made me help him get it from the guys over at Gent.

SAMMY: An “ink machine,” huh? Sounds like we know the reason why we’re in debt now.

WALLY: Maybe he really is trying to bring those characters to life. That’d be cool, yet a bit unsettling.

SAMMY: You mean “Very” unsettling... I’m working so much I’m starting to see Bendy in my sleep. That smile... And those eyes... It’s like he’s always watching me, observing... Waiting... Few more months of this, and I wouldn’t be surprised if that grinning little devil drove me completely insane.

WALLY: Ah-ha, oh please.

SAMMY: I’m serious, Wally. That smile... something’s just wrong with that smile. Can’t put my finger on it.
{WALLY: Shake it off, Sammy. I'm sure you'll be fine. It's probably just due to being
overworked. I mean, we all are.}

SAMMY: ...Yeah. Yeah, you're probably right. Every time I turn around, there's more work to
do.

[A loud buzzing noise erupts, notifying employees that their break time was over.]

SAMMY: [stretches] Best to get back to my songs now. Four cartoons are almost complete,
and all of them need a tune by tomorrow. Typical Joey planning...

WALLY: Alright! See ya around, Sammy! ...Ah, wait! Sammy! What's the deal with you and
Susie? If I didn't know any better, I'd say there's love in the air! ...Sammy? Sammy! Was it
something I said!! SAMMY!!

[Wally runs after Sammy, who seems to be walking faster after hearing Wally call out for him.]

{Joey Drew Studios - Joey Drew’s Office}

JOEY: That should shut them up for a while. The more they stay with me, the more souls I will
have to start the process all over again.

[Joey sits down in his chair and stares at the ceiling with a blank expression, lost in thought.]

JOEY: “Bring dreams to life.” ...I know we will. And this place will become the best studio
company to ever exist! [Joey looks over at the picture given to him by his old partner after he quit working with him:
A picture wishing good luck with Bendy, Alice, and Boris drawn on it. Signed by “Henry
Stein”.]

JOEY: It's simply awe-inspiring what one can accomplish with their own hands, isn't it, old
friend? Look at what we've built. We created life itself! Not just on the silver screen, but in the
hearts of those we've entertained with our fantastic moving pictures. Soon, once I bring them all
to life, I will make them real! Our work will become phenomenal! It's like I always said, old
friend. Just keep dreaming.

Pistanthrophobia

Ma'reesha Randolph
Armstrong High School

Pistanthrophobia.

Lies flowing like wind.
The more lies, the stronger the breeze.
Blowing in our face, blowing to no end.
Getting colder, getting fierce.

Lies can be seen from eyes.
The eyes of coldness, sadness, and fear.
Leaving us with no trust or with guilt.

It hurts to have no trust.
Can’t get close to people without assuming.
This leaves us both alone and lonely.

Can’t believe anything anyone says.
Becoming more insecure and heartbroken.

Expecting anything from anyone.
Closeness can turn into distance.
An angel can turn to the devil.

Don’t be sad, it’s just life.
Live it to the fullest.
Be independent, enjoy fun times.
Make memories, not tears.
Learn and make life better.

Hurdles can turn into masterpieces
Like caterpillars turn into butterflies.
Be strong, healing will start.

Lies flow like the wind, but
the wind stops at some point.
Fear
Jasmyn Walker
John Marshall High School

People fear what they can’t comprehend, things such as death and the dark. Our imagination is the origin of fear...

Helen loved watching her mother work in her lab. She was a scientist in a field where any idea could be turned into something more. This idea brought Helen to her knees with excitement.

Everyday Helen’s mother shared her findings, whatever she had learned. But one day, she didn’t leave her lab. Helen paced at home, her nerves on edge, wondering what could be keeping her mother for so long. At the peak of her worry, Helen decided to go to the lab and check in on her mother.

She crept quietly inside, her bare feet cold on the steel floor. She couldn’t see much in the dark room apart from the occasional glow of the shelved chemicals. Although the room was spacious, the scents all around seemed to assault her nose at once. As she covered her nose with the back of her hand, she blinked twice, causing chills to creep up her lower back. Turning her head, she noticed a dark figure slowly moving several feet away. Her body lit up with relief, thinking it was her mother.

Just as she opened her mouth to speak her mother’s name, her vision went black. Her mouth dried up, and her body felt stiff. Loud noises echoed through her ears, and images of blood entered her mind. She lost consciousness.

When Helen woke, a feeling of warmth wrapped around her. Her breathing was faint, but she held onto it. The voice of the warm embrace spoke, “This is all you have left, dear.”

Handlebars
Rey Flores
Open High School

Perfect rows of perfect houses
Like your perfect rows of perfect teeth,
Stealing cigarettes from your father,
We smoke them behind the school.
This youth is golden,
We hold it precious in our hands as we ride
Your bike to the grocery store,
Wobbling as I sit on the handlebars.
Pressed flowers tucked into the lined pages
Of your math notebook,
We’ve collected them over the years,
Sending postcards from faraway lands,
I’ll keep them in the drawer in my chest,
Next to my cellophane heart, and my old, tattered childhood.
One day, I’ll come back and bury them
With the bones of my first dog.
And one day,
I hope we can be kids again.
Red, Blue and Black
Lost Star
Thomas Jefferson High School

Dare to Soar
Impa La Odin
Drop With a Must
Empty Sorrow
Tears
Falling
Anger
His fire
"We are
An E
Res"
Life is Like a Ferris Wheel

Niles Winckler
Hanover High School

Life is like a Ferris wheel,
Sometimes the sky is your best friend
The sun and the clouds are there during the daylight
The moon and the stars by night.
But sometimes, they’re gone,
Nowhere to be seen,
And you’re all alone
Stuck on the ground
With no one.

Cotton candy stings my tongue,
A bit too sweet for me,
But yet, irresistible.
The fairy lights start to glare in the gleaming eyes of imaginary people,
Complimenting the stars that aren’t there.
You’re the only person here,
But you’re too distant and dazed,
And I can’t feel you
Not at all.

I manage to snap back into reality
And quickly hop onto my seat,
Beckoning you to join me,
A satisfied smile on your face,
And I feel your expression fall
As the ride swings me up.
A frown forms on my face
As I realize I’m all alone.

I finally get all the way up,
And I expect the moon to greet me with a warm hug and kiss,
But instead, she just turns away with a pitiful look on her face.

And I know I’ve failed.
There’s a sudden lurch,
And I’m back down

Because not even the stars love me now,
And then it stops.

I’m back on earth, and
I shake my seat.
I fight and mangle,
Kick and scream,
But it won’t budge,
And I’m stuck on the ground once more.

Life is like a Ferris Wheel.
You have your ups and your downs.
Other days the ride is broken;
Some days, the ride works, and then it doesn’t.
Then there are days where it stops then starts.

Sometimes I feel like I’m on a Ferris Wheel.
One minute, I’m on top of the world,
Then next, I’m on rock bottom
Over and over all day long
Because a lot about life is great,
But then it’s not.

Life is like a Ferris wheel.
Sometimes you’re up,
Sometimes you’re down.

In the end, you just have to learn to enjoy the ride.
In the end, you’re still you,
And I’m still me,
Just at different points in our lives.
In Memory
Aalisha Armstead
Armstrong High School

My mom, Kathy, had been sick for 8 years, and she passed away on November 1, 2017, I think. She knew she was going to pass away because I remember her asking, “What if I die the next day?” And then, she died the next day.

The day before she passed away, we were in the car. She was supposed to take me to get my hair done. Before we left, her head went back, her eyes rolled to the back of her head, and she started throwing up. She went to the hospital that night, and she had a dream that she was going to die in my dad’s arms. I believe that would’ve happened if I had never called the ambulance, but I did.

At school the next day, my brother came and got me. His eyes were red, and I already knew what happened. He told me we were going out to eat, so I snapped back, “We could have gone out to eat when I got out of school.” Ten minutes later, he said, “Lisha,” and that’s when I really knew that my mom had passed away.

By the time we got to the hospital, most of my family members were there. When I saw her on the bed, I broke down crying and dropped to the floor. They took me out of the room and gave me some water. Then, everyone came to my house to gather around and talk, but I went to my mom’s room, laid on her bed, and started to cry even more. I miss her so much.

Gone
Janee Long
Armstrong High School

When I wake up, I’d be thinking about her. I feel like she’s still here to this day, talking about happy times and good memories of things that we did together. Sometimes, I just cry because of the pain I carry missing her. When I had to see her like that it broke me to pieces.
When Tables Turn

Max Awesome
Thomas Jefferson High School

Neko:

My best friend and head assistant Lisa was driving me to work, and I was starting to regret not taking Chronun's advice about just buying a car of my own. I felt a sudden twinge in my chest at the thought of him, but quickly dismissed it. Today I had to keep my spirits up, so instead I reviewed my checklist. Phone, keys, laptop, coffee, notebook... notebook! I couldn’t forget the most important piece of my work. Thankful for the extra time, I dashed to my study and retrieved the heavy, worn book containing all my life's research.

As I stepped out into the cool Seattle breeze, my phone buzzed. Lisa must be here, I thought. I shuffled along the sidewalk, searching for her blue Nissan, when I heard a familiar honk to my left. I turned my head to see her parked near 'Mighty-O Donuts' and munching on a raspberry filled pastry. I sprinted to her car and climbed into the passenger seat. “Ready for a big day?” she asked me with a grin.

Chronun:
I stared at my scowling reflection in the mirror as I tried to fix my consistently untidy hair. Why am I even trying? It's no use, they won't care what I look like, they never did. Except today felt different, maybe it was because today wasn't like any other day. I let out an exasperated sigh and gave up on my shaggy, disheveled locks. I glanced at the clock on the kitchen stove and gave a Startled gasp. “I'm late! I was supposed to be at the center ten minutes ago!” I quickly gathered my things and ran out the door, hoping to catch the next shuttle.

Neko:
I honestly never imagined this would happen, I thought to myself as I gazed down at the massive crowd beneath me, waiting for me to make a speech. There were so many cameras and reporters. My hands started to shake; I never was very good at this part of the job. I heard a thundering pair of feet making their way up the stairwell and turned curiously to face the door. A sweaty and rumpled looking Chronun burst through it. I smiled as I took in his neck length, mussy black hair, his untucked shirt, and his gleaming, smooth tan skin. His cheeks flushed a deep scarlet when he saw the expression I was wearing. Not wanting to embarrass him, I pivoted back to look at the crowd. A new surge of confidence swam through me. I was ready.
Neko:
I didn’t embarrass him, I assured myself walking back to my office. I just don’t want him to feel like he’s unwanted, because he’s not, well not to me at least. Not everyone realizes how special he is, how smart, how important, how beautiful...

I was so absorbed in my thoughts that I didn’t realize Lisa was calling me. “Nekon! Nekon, where are you going?” I came back to my senses when I saw I was in the same hallway as Chronun’s office. I must’ve unconsciously walked here while deep in thought. “I was just taking a last stroll through the building before the big mission,” I explained, trying to seem as nonchalant as possible. Lisa’s face seemed unreadable. “Well,” she exclaimed, “the team’s ready to take off whenever you are.” She made an odd-looking expression. “Are you sure it’s a good idea to bring your ex-boyfriend on this trip? I mean, he isn’t exactly the brainiest guy if you know what I mean. Why is he coming along anyway?” I took a deep breath and stared at the floor.

“I know he has potential; I just want to give him an opportunity to show everyone else.”

“You’re sure you’re not doing this just to get him back?”

She knew that I was lying. We talked about everything together, especially relationships. I put on a crooked smile and raised my eyes to look at her triumphant grin.

“Did you really think I wasn’t going to suspect anything? Your office is still littered with pictures of him.”

“It’s not litter, it’s for decor,” I mumbled bitterly.

“Yeah okay,” Lisa rolled her eyes. “We’d better be off your highness,” she declared in a hopelessly false British accent, “your golden chariot awaits!”

Chronun:
Neko was late again, as usual, to the take off. My colleagues and I sat waiting for them for twenty minutes before they showed up with Lisa, beaming animatedly. I felt an ache in my chest and my face turn red. They motioned for us to stand, and we huddled around them.

“Alright guys, ready for a pep talk?” I heard someone behind me groan. “So as you all know, this is an important mission. In the year 5218, and we are going to be the first people in the world to have successfully achieved time travel. Now I’ve picked only the best of the best for this trip,” they flickered a brief smile at me, “and I believe that each and every one of you has the potential to do great things, to be a part of something big. We are not normal, we are scientists, we are the pioneers of the future, and we will succeed!” The small audience clapped and enthusiastically applaud our leader.

Neko:
We arrived at a grassy field by helicopter half past two in the afternoon. The weather was warm and there was a clear blue sky above us. Perfect weather, I sarcastically thought, to go explore somewhere else. In the middle of the wide, open field there was a large metal box, large enough to comfortably fit seven or eight people, in this case five. Lisa, Chronun, myself, and the mechanics Tyler and Margaret. We ambled over to make our final inspections before we activated it. Once the final inspection was cleared, we climbed a ladder and entered the door on the top of the box. Since I was the deviser of the machine, it was soon apparent that I would be the main one to control it. I took my place in the chair in front of the monitor while the others sat comfortably on the cushioned benches lining two walls. They buckled their safety belts.

“First stop, 4:39 p.m., January 4th, 3502.”

Chronun:
Being absorbed in time was the strangest feeling. It was like I was being stretched, but it didn’t hurt. I felt light and airy, as though I weighed almost nothing. I don’t know how long it took for us to reach our destination. It felt like we were travelling through time for hours, but it was over so quickly. My stomach suddenly dropped, and I felt myself stretch back to my normal size. We didn’t seem to be moving anymore. I looked around me with fuzzy vision and saw that everyone else had a dazed expression. I was sure I looked just as dopey. The feeling wore off after a few minutes, and I un buckled my safety belt, clumsily attempting to stand up.

“Did it work?” I asked in a shaky voice.

“I don’t know,” Neko exclaimed. “We’ll have to go outside to find out.”

The team slowly made their way up the ladder again; it seemed everyone was still a little shaken up from the trip. Especially Neko, they were never a big fan of the roller coasters. When we used to go to the amusement park, they always wanted to hang out in the food court. I felt another painful ache in my chest. I tried to shun the thought away, but it lingered. I was the last one to climb up the wall to the surface. When I emerged from the machine, I felt a strong gust of cool air wash over me. I shivered, wishing I’d brought a coat, and looked up above. The sky was smothered in dark grey clouds; not a sliver of warm, bright light shone through them. I stepped off the ladder and swooned, still a little nauseous from the trip. To my right Margaret was heavily retching what looked like the remains of a pasta lunch. I had to turn my head to keep from hurling myself. Once the sound of her dry heaving died out, Neko cleared their throat.

“That was quite the experience, and I apologize for any inconvenience it might have brought to you, but we have to get moving and start collecting data. It will be getting dark in a few hours, and we don’t want to waste any time,” they exclaimed with a wink. “Now, let’s all grab our cameras and lab equipment and explore!”

I grabbed my favorite 3-D camera and began to jog up a hill when I heard Neko calling my name. I turned around and saw they were running after me, grasping a fuzzy brown jacket. They shoved it into my arms. “I thought you might get cold,” Neko explained with a lopsided grin. “Oh yeah uh... thanks,” I hastily put it on, eager to end the conversation.

“Mind if I join you?” they asked, Too late.

“Oh, no not at all,” I replied with an unchanged smile. What else was I supposed to say? They were the whole reason I got to go on this trip, so I couldn’t ignore them completely.

We walked together for a little less than a mile, quietly taking pictures, when Neko broke the silence.
“I actually wanted to talk to you about something,” they exclaimed.
They stopped walking. I followed suit. My heart leapt. Here it is, I thought, they’re going to
tell me what they should’ve told me a long time ago.

**Neko:**
I couldn’t believe I was about to tell him. After holding it in, I was finally going to divulge
what had been weighing in my mind for seven years, sitting on the edge of my tongue,
waiting for this exact moment to come.

“I’m sorry.”
I paused, surveying his blank expression before continuing.

“I’m sorry about what happened, how I treated you. I’m sorry that I got caught up in my
work and neglected you. Ever since we met in that physics class in college, since that first
date, first kiss, first everything, my feelings never faltered. I never stopped loving you. I’ve felt
awful every day since you left me. Every single day, I have regretted the way I treated you. I’m so
sorry for hurting you, Chronun. Can you forgive me?”

He had tears in his chocolate brown eyes. “Neko, I loved you. You meant everything to me. I
used to envision us having a life together. I wanted to wake up next to you every morning for
the rest of my life.”

“Don’t you still want that?” I asked quietly. Tears were streaming down his cheeks.
He took a step towards me, so that our faces were now only inches apart. It began to
drizzle rain. Water droplets quickly turned to thick raindrops. Our eyes never broke contact. I
slightly inclined my head forward. His eyes widened and he swiftly twisted around, dropped
his camera, and ran.

**Chronun:**
Why was I so stupid? I thought to myself as I sprinted over soft, grassy hills. Why couldn’t I
tell them what I felt? I slowed to a leisured stride. The time travel machine was now coming
into view. Maybe because I didn’t know what I felt.

None of the others were back yet. I climbed back into the box and sat in the pilot’s seat. I
felt a surge of fury wash over me. I was angry. Angry at Neko for not apologizing sooner,
angry at myself for wanting to forgive him. Angry because I didn’t know what I was supposed
to feel. I surveyed the small room, looking for something to take my anger out on. My eyes
landed on a pair of scissors used for emergency reengineering. I didn’t think, I just grabbed
them and hacked the open cords, not caring what they were connected to. I cleaved every
cable I could reach. When I couldn’t find any more, I realized what I had done. I threw the
scissors across the room, curled up, and cried.

**Neko:**
I stood in place for several minutes, debating what to do, before hurrying after him. I had to
make sure he was okay. I didn’t slow down until I reached the bulky machine. I quickly
climbed the ladder and jumped into the room. I saw Chronun softly crying in a corner, and I
slowly crouched beside him.

“Chronun? Are you okay?” I asked him gently.
He raised his tear-streaked face, seeming unsure of how to respond. I didn’t know what to
say to him. We had both been through so much. All the grief and pain we struggled with had
led us here in this time machine... the time machine.

“Chronun, do you know why I built this time travel machine?” I asked him. He shook his
head.
Your Beauty
Ashlyah Hodge
Elkhart Thompson Middle School

Let go of the past
Trust the future embrace
Change comes out of the Cocoon. Unfurl your wings
Dare to get off the ground
Ride the breeze, savor
The flower Put on your Brightest colors. Fly high
African, Caucasian, Asian, any
Color, you are strong, beautiful,
Fearless, amazing, let your Beauty show

Believe and You Will Receive
Adriana Keyes
Lucille Brown Middle School

Believe and be the best you can be because no one else can do it for you. Don’t follow what someone else is doing. Do your own thing. Love yourself and don’t let people bully or judge you. People will talk about you forever, so just learn how to live your life by following your passions and being yourself. If you don’t, other people will try to make you look bad, so you can become one of them. You can do anything you set your mind to. Whatever inspires you or makes you happy, just do it! Everyone is different, and that’s what is unique about you. You may get a million no’s, but I promise, eventually, you will get that one yes and keep it going!

No One Has a Voice Like Mine
Jordyn Johnson
Elkhart Thompson Middle School

My voice is unique because no one is capable of having a voice like mine.
When I express myself, I do it in a unique and special way.
I have a voice, and that voice has a purpose.

Abyss
Cat Anderson
Lucille Brown Middle School

Let’s go deeper into the abyss,
I’ll hold you by my side, and we’ll go down.
The cold dark waves will wash away our minds.
When tiny lights fill by, we will forget.
Although I hold your hand, when I look back, you’re gone.
Now, I’m by myself, and I am lost.
I’ve been alone the whole time; you were never there.
You were just a dream,
But so was I.

Disease Outbreak
Kennedy Fancher
Salvation Army Boys and Girls Club

City,
Trash.
The road that looks good is bad and the road that looks bad is good.
Tents everywhere,
people sell scrap metal,
there are no rules.
A protection seals where they live.
Acid and throw up, piled next to Dead birds and corpses.
A Creepy School Trip

Alannah Benjamin and Adaviyah Aziz
Henderson Middle School

All the children went to the cornfield,
But they were scared and did not want to stay too long.
Cali was the oldest girl in the school, so
Donald dared Cali to enter the corn field until dawn.
Everyone oh’d and ah’d that Cali couldn’t do it.
Fearlessly, she entered the corn field alone.

Cali said, “Cali is not going to make it.”
“Hello? Is anyone out there?” said Cali.
Isabella called for the teacher, but there was no reply.
Jack-o-lanterns lit up as Cali walked by.
“Killer ahead, killer ahead,” whispered the lanterns.

“Leave me alone!” said Cali.
Mini faces started to appear in the darkness.
Nobody knows where they are coming from.

“Oh no, I better get out of here!”
Please, please, just leave me alone!” yelled Cali.
Queen of the cornfield went down to have a talk with Cali.
Raging with anger, the Queen yelled, “You have five minutes to get out!”
Slowly, she disappeared.

Turning around, Cali realized that there was nothing behind her.
Unconsciously, she closed her eyes.
Very slowly, Cali opened them back up wide.

“What am I going to do?” she sobbed.

Xylophone sounds were used to count down her time.
Yelling for help and running, she ran out to the cornfield.


Just a Robot

Micki Robyns
Lucille Brown Middle School

The boy is sly,
The hero dies,
The burden cries,
I understand and let it drip dry.
The killer climbs towards the sky.
I comprehend a cruel display
Taken away
On Valentine’s Day.
I... understand,
Twisted astray,
Revenge is paid,
The liar’s prey.

Time Machine

Torron Woodson
Henderson Middle School

A watch,
Electric force field
Moves physical space.
Time, when you want to go.
Solar power,
Strap it to an inanimate object,
Adat to size in space.
If the watch has enough electricity,
It will move through time.
Art is My Voice

Ariana Thurmond
Elkhart Thompson Middle School

When I draw, it shows my voice and how I feel. For example, I will draw one of my teachers that I dislike with devil ears, or sometimes, I will draw characters from an anime show I watch. I draw them and then send them to the creator of the anime. My friends love it when I draw because when I draw it shows my voice. When I draw, it has to be for a purpose, to show what my voice feels. Drawing is my voice, the part that shows my personality and it makes me a bigger person. This is what my friends love about me. Maybe when I grow up, just maybe, my art will continue to be my voice. Art can be a powerful voice because of the colors, the skill, love, and the hard work you put into it.
Youth Program Participants
Fall 2018 – Summer 2019

Binford Middle School
- Ngozi Fleming, Kevin Gerrick, Ford Armstead, Tristan Snead, and Ilan Winston.

Boushall Middle School
- Angel Campos, Kamryah Butler, Joseph Simmons, Catherine Cobbs, Marcel Baptiste, Julissa Munoz-Cruz, Elizabeth Sernerfi, Alexander Montesalegro, Quentoria Chandler-Marcos, Andy Santos, and Jazmin Ortiz.

Etkhardt Thompson Middle School
- Nakia Abell, Shakira Donson, Keren Garcia Andino, Dayana Guadardo, Javon Khan, Teck Holmes, De Marcus Mason, Yenfei Rivera-Guerra, Bianca Rodriguez, Alexis Thompson, Saniya Turner, Michelle Vasquez, Chrisae Vaughan, Sheity Zelaya Montes Flores, Desonna Evans, Isabelle Nova, David Martinez, Kavontae Bailey, Shyheim Beffield, Ashiyah Hodge, Autumn Johnson, Queen Murphy, Kearstin Russell, Gabrielle Spencer, Makayla White, Michael Harris, Genesis Ruiz, Quanesha Evans-Hatcher, Dayon Taylor, Emma Martin, Imani Adewale, Lanajah Durant, Jordyn Johnson, Jayla Johnson, Ariana Thurmond, Luther Williams, Jarvon Wingfield, and Renijah Meekins.

Henderson Middle School

Lucille Brown Middle School
- Ti’elle Young, Rodney Payne, Zion Delaney, Adriana Keyes, Lala Littlejohn, Julia Hall-Pace, Herbert Bullock, Tremain Jones, An’etre Trevelle, Sharai Chaney, Christopher Barrera, Ameena Parrish, Christopher Arellano, Paris Smith, Sami Tyler, Omnairn Goodwin, Malla Harris, Liniyah Miller, Cezanne McFall, Xavier Miller, Jadon Morris, Ty’Shawn Morton, Dimitri Williams, Larry Williams, Talitha Bacon-Perry, Jaheim Donaldson, Mya’ya Hyman, Herbert Moses, and Madeleine Stup.

Salvation Army Boys & Girls Clubs

Armstrong High School

John Marshall High School

Mayor’s Youth Academy Summer Writing Mentors
- Daeron Bacon, Patricia Powell, Yah’Mata McPherson, and Gracias Alexander.

Thomas Jefferson High School
- Kirtavia Laney, Ashantay Coleman, Maryjane Perkins-Lynch, Anthony Adkins, Xavier Adkins, Tracy Fleming, Tristan Wynn, Christopher Oliver, Dion Cosby, Cozette Bell Ferguson, Gall Luce, La’Ree Woolridge, Destiny Knight, Craylon Johnson, Miranda Russell, Max Awesome, Aaron Johnson, Amazin Bullock, Ra’Jahne Harris, Geovanny Mejia, and Justin Daniels.
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