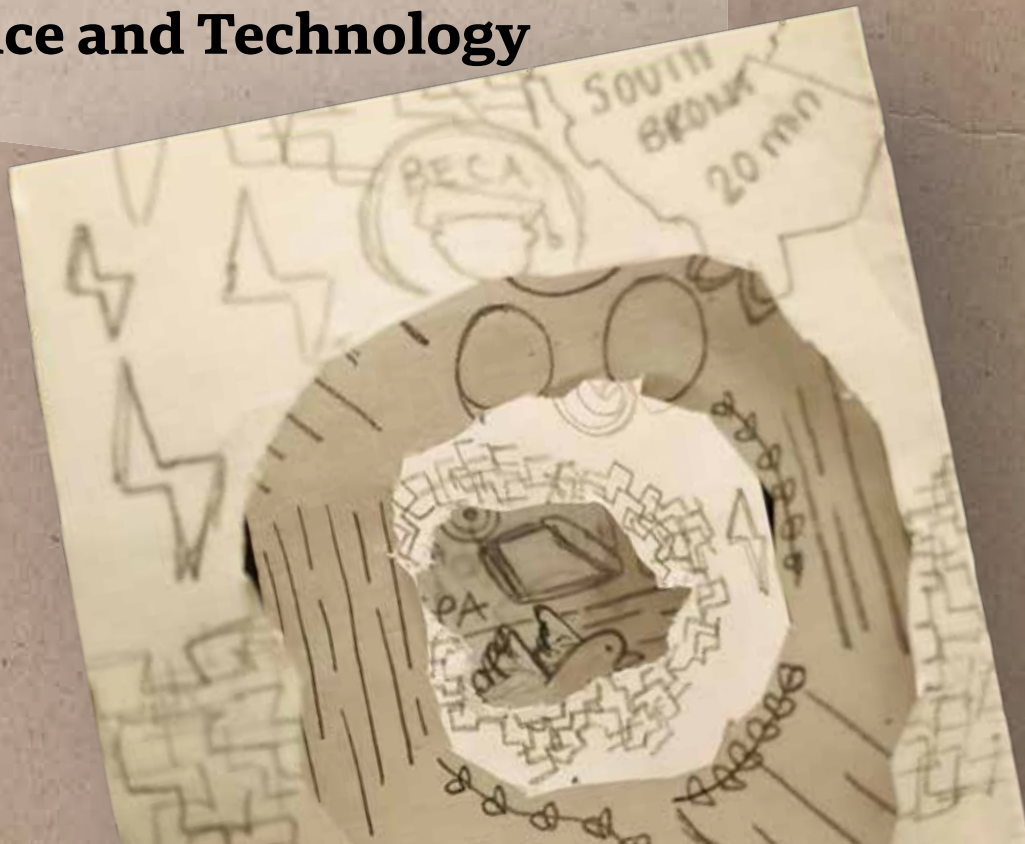


# Tales

# of Us

**10th Grade at M.S./H.S. 223  
The Laboratory School  
of Finance and Technology**



# Tales

# of Us

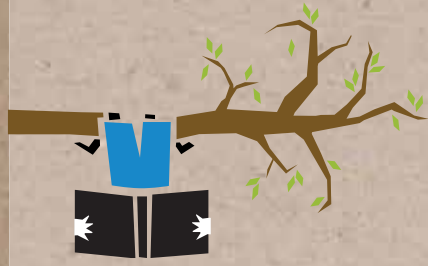
**10th Grade at M.S./H.S. 223  
The Laboratory School  
of Finance and Technology**

Behind the Book | New York

Behind the Book's mission is to develop engaged readers and writers in underserved NYC public schools by designing and delivering programs that are multi-disciplinary, culturally responsive, and promote deeper connections to books and their authors.

Visit us at [www.behindthebook.org](http://www.behindthebook.org)

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Behind the Book | 216 West 135th Street | New York, NY 10030



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Due to COVID all Behind the Book programs were provided virtually. We recognize and appreciate our teachers and students for persevering during this very challenging time.

In the interest of honoring student voice, Behind the Book presents students' work as received from the teacher.

This book was made possible by a generous grant from The Korein Foundation.

**We dedicate this to our families  
and friends who inspire us daily.**

# About the Program

The baseball player Chili Thomas said “Getting older is mandatory. Growing up is optional.” Pinpointing when we grow up is not always easy and through this virtual program, Ms. Drame and Mr. Fox’s 10th graders explored the essential question: What is the turning point between childhood and adulthood? To start this journey of reflection students read the coming of age novel, *The Closest I’ve Come* by Fred Aceves.

During the first author visit, students analyzed the novel’s protagonist, Marcos, who struggled to fit in and found the courage to be vulnerable. Then students played a drama game with the author to connect with the characters’ turning points to adulthood. Volunteers then facilitated group interviews with the students to help them identify markers for their transition to adulthood which informed their personal narratives.

During the second author visit, Fred Aceves provided individualized feedback on students’ narratives and students shared lines from their drafts. Behind the Book teaching artist, Candice Humphries, led the art workshop where students used elements from their writing to create tunnel books, which are books made in physical and visual layers. Students allowed themselves to be vulnerable like the main character Marcos, and they share their personal turning points and artwork in this book.



# Contents


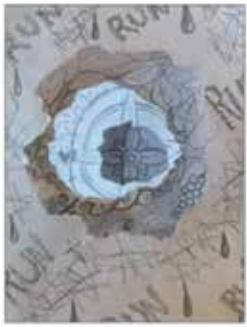

Sereena .....	2	Saratul .....	34
James .....	4	Jonael .....	37
Helany .....	6	Jacqueline .....	39
Alex .....	9	King .....	42
Rouguiatou .....	10		
Bruce .....	13	About the Visiting Author .....	46
Moustafa .....	17	About the Student Authors .....	47
Jeremiah .....	18	About Behind the Book .....	47
Jonathan .....	21	Common Core Learning Standards Addressed .....	48
Randy .....	22		
Jocalyn .....	24		
Michelle .....	26		
Roselyn .....	30		
Lucy .....	32		



Today we will be making a tunnel artist book in which you will reflect on an event that has shaped you as a person. You will need a sheet of paper and a pencil.



Artists have used the idea of layers in their artworks for a long time, but in a tunnel book the layers are both physical and visual.

Think back to the event and how it changed you. What did you learn? Did it change your view of yourself or the world around you? Use the last page to show the lasting impact it made on you.

Stand your book open and photograph to turn in. Try a few different positions for the camera/ paper to find your favorite shot.



# Sereena



## Untitled

As a young child everything was easy, aint really had to worry about a lot of things, living life, having fun and going on exciting adventures. When being a kid school was one of my main priorities, I would love to go to school. Not only did I go to learn, but it was a lot of fun to go to school and have fun with your friends. It was a better way of life I had as a young child. Everything had gone my way if i wanted something i would get it. I was very athletic, always wanted to play some type of sport or do something related to that and never liked staying in the house.

Sports was the thing that made me focus more on school but as i got older i didn't feel as motivated to play sports anymore. Once I went to middle school I got the passion to play sports again and I started playing basketball which caught my heart. I love basketball with all my heart. One of my favorite game was my first game in our season I just started with a new team and I was feeling ready to kill. I had a lot of anxiety of not really knowing anyone I was playing with besides three people. Coming in the first game I started off slow then all of sudden just was scoring nonstop, and as a Point Guard I made sure I was controlling the floor for my teammates and giving them the ball to score too. The end of the game

I felt like I gave my teammates a good chance to understand the way I play and get used to it. I finished the game wit 12 points and 6 assists.

Later on in my middle school year I wasn't feeling school at all. I would go and do no work and would go late or not go at all. I just felt like school wasn't for me. I had no push to realize how important it was. My eighth grade year I realized if my grades are bad it's going to affect me in high school. I fixed my grades and was proud of myself. Beginning of 9th grade year was so hard for me. I was struggling with doing my work and wasn't as focused on school as I should be, I was able to be motivated by basketball to keep going because in order to play you had to have good grades and I really wanted to play and I continued trying. Covid ruined my basketball season and basketball was the reason I was trying in school so hard. 10th grade year which is this year I'm really more focused on school than I ever was, been doing all my work kinda sad and still don't have a season, but happy to be able to be working out and doing what I love.

While in highschool as I grew older I realized that not everyone is there for you, and that you outgrow people while you get older and mature. People dont always mature and when they get older, that separates close friendships or friends in general. Now that we live in a world where anything can happen it's good to have your real ones close to you. ♥

# James

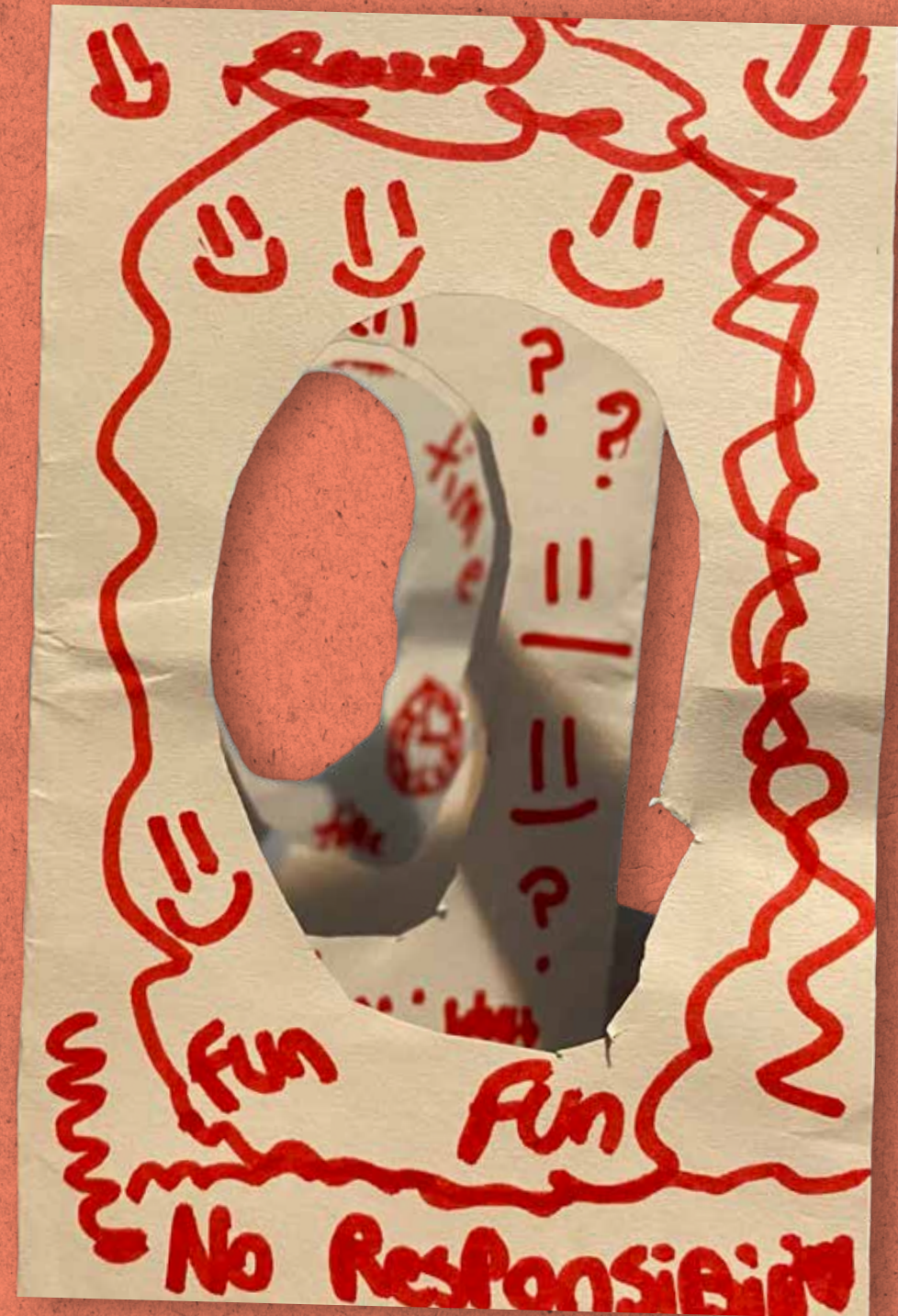
## Life

As a kid from new york there really is no going outside to play in the front yard or jumping in the trampoline and when we was there it was kids being kids but i went back like over a year ago when life was normal and i realized that we are all old now even some of them are driving and we were not "kids" anymore and when we all meet back in 2014 at the time i was like the youngest in the group and we were all still kids but realizing that we all grew up and are moving on to the real world. And it made me realize the time's we would all play outside and playing outside in the sun in the hot weather of north carolina in may my first time really leaving new york and getting to know country, or suburbs and playing outside is now just a good memory Because we are growing up and have responsibilities and like i said before i was one of the youngest in the group of (the age range) so you imagine the youngest is now in 10th grade you could only imagine what my older cousin's are up to now.

I feel like turning points are never realised at the moment but it's looking back when i was like 8 playing outside with cousin i never met i never realised that, that's my childhood and not thinking

about young adulthood but living in the moment because now it's just a memory. And you realise it's a turning point looking back. You never realise you are making memories until you remember.

My turning point in leaving my childhood was when i was in 7th grade about to turn 12 and i realized that everyone around me is entering their teen years and i was still a year away from that bit that's when i realised i was growing up. Because I start to see the people around me become much older. And I guess that's when it started to sink in. and with growing up comes changes so i can't remember exactly how i was as a kid compared to now but i have a good feeling that i am a different person now especially since ive had alot of time for myself over the past couple of months and see what has happened over the course of my life. Since quarantine i haven't seen a lot of my family members that often but the ones i have seen have pointed out obvious changes like yOu gOt tAlLeR, yOuR vOicE hAs cHaNgEd. Stuff like that. But i feel like as a child i was more energetic and i was more outgoing in school and now i don't really care as much as i did when i was a kid because i feel like my perspective on stuff has changed as a kid. ♥





## Helany

### School Stresses Everyone, Especially Me

Entering high school and choosing the right school is kind of a big deal! Here I am entering the dean's office, college flags hanging next to his desk, stacks of papers all over his desk, a great view of the laundromat, and Mr. Perez.

"Here at HS 233 there's a lot of opportunities that not many other students in the Bronx can get," offered Mr. Perez.

"Yeah, well I also do not want to be in the same building for four more years. I want to have a new experience at another high school," I said in an ardent voice. He laughs and hands me the paper, where I listed my top twelve high schools I would like to attend. I placed HS 223 at the bottom, the 12th spot.

I instantly regretted it! I was chosen into BECA, Bronx Early College Academy. I was sad when I heard I was going to BECA, it was not in my top three choices.

Finally, the first day of high school has come. "I was not ready. I had to take a bus, all by myself!" "I have never used any kind of transportation alone, so yeah I was terrified!" I can feel my heartbeat racing, it feels like it is about to explode, palms are getting sweaty, and it feels like I'm in a sauna. At this point I'm thinking to myself "umm when do I get off", "did I take the wrong bus?", "should I call my mom even though my phone is on 6 percent?"

All these thoughts made me realize "I'm in highschool now, there are kids who already know their ways around trains and

buses, so I need to calm down and ask for help or get out of the bus and follow google maps." I decided to get off the bus and I followed the blue line on google maps.

But shortly after three days I left the school! In those three days I was thinking of how my high school years would look compared to HS 223. It made me sad, I couldn't handle having to wake up at 6:50, get ready, leave at 7:10, and take the bus. The school was not as good as I thought, the gym was small compared to the one you see in movies, the school shares with four other schools, the teachers didn't look professional or seemed interested in teaching, and I didn't have any friends. So with all this in mind I went back to MS 223.

Fortunately, I'm back at Ms 223 where I don't need to take a bus, I can literally walk for 5 minutes and I made it to school! I felt much more at ease that is until I went to my ELA class.

Ms. Lattanzio, the 9th grade ELA teacher talked to us about GPA and how important it is to have a high GPA, and how students in poor neighborhoods like Mott Haven have the least amount of chances to go into a good college. That worried me a little bit because "I'm someone who wants to go to the best college." I realized how four years go by quickly so I need to stay on top of my work in order to maintain a high GPA.

The same topic was spoken again but this time in advisory. There she spoke on how in order to graduate we need to get the 44 credits and community service and how we need to stay on top of that. She also spoke to us about P-BATs, we also need to do P-BATs in order to graduate. When I was in middle school I would not show up when I needed to be present, I would make a lame excuse but all the students knew I was lying. Therefore, my grades





## Helany, continued.

would cost the consequences. Looking back at it, it was dumb of me but now I've grown to be more responsible and capable of presenting. I still do very much hate presenting but knowing that it's 50% of my grade I suck it up and do my best on presenting.

Taking the bus and trains are still not my specialties but now I know it's important to know how to adapt in challenging situations. There's not always going to be someone to look out for you or be there 24/7, there comes a time where we all have to be independent. Four years is not that long, those years will zoom right through you. I know I'm capable of staying on track and having my handy-dandy planner right by my desk is a life changer! ♥

## Alex

### Alex's Life

Character trait I exhibited as a child was happiness because when I was a child I always got everything. Traits that I exhibited as a young adult are happiness because I got a job and I'm making a lot of money. My mom connected to this turning point because she helped me make money and she gave me everything. This turning point changed my life because before I ask for stuff and now I buy my own stuff with my money. This memory was when I was young. I was born in New York in a big hispanic family.

My mother and father were spreaded because they like to fight a lot and argue. Then my dad left and my mom was upset because no man will take care of her (if you know what I mean). Me and my brother were kinda upset but at the time we grew up as teens we didn't care no more. My brother and I love video games, and we like to eat pizza. My mom did trust me to drink/eat a lot of sugar and I always get a sugar rush.

I drank soda (pepsi) and I was in a sugar rush then I jumped in the bed then I hurt myself and I got a scar on the right side of my face. My mother was worried that I passed out because I was not moving. So, she called 911 and then they rushed me

to the hospital and the doctor wrapped around my face with band aid. Time passed and I went to my babysitter house and her dog was biting my shoelace three times and I got mad so I chased him round but then he outplayed me and I hit myself in a glass table. I was bleeding like hell and I was crying like hell.

They rushed me to the hospital and put band-aids on. My mom was worrying if I'm going to get a third scar so for now she was watching me. My turning point changed when I got a job because now I don't ask my mom for money no more. Where I work at is the pharmacy, doing delivery, stocking, and moping.

My mom connected to this turning point because she helped me make money and she gave me everything.

This turning point changed my life because before I ask for stuff and now I buy my own stuff with my money and I am independent. My brother and I had a great relationship with each other. For example we will stay up all night just to complete a game. I have a good relationship with my friends, we play video games together and I'm the best one. Jeremiah, Juan, Simon, and Bruce suck at every video I'm the best one. They are praying to god that "I just want to beat alex just this once please god please". If you ever ask them they are going to lie because they are salty that I'm god and their peasant. ♥

# Rouguiatou

## Change Isn't Always Bad

You ever watched Disney movies that made us think that our teen years are the most exciting and amazing times of our lives? Well, they definitely lied to us... being a child was way better than being a young adult.

Growing up and not being here when I was a kid because I was in Africa made such a difference for me. Which is why I think I was very outgoing and clumsy. When I came back at the age of 7, I remember I used to be very friendly at school and wanted to talk to everyone and be popular. Especially in elementary school where nobody really bullied each other and everyone got along because we were all kids, I wanted to get along with everyone. But there were times where I was looked at as a weirdo my first year of elementary school because I didn't speak english and only spoke french. Kids would talk to me and I had no idea what they were saying.

All I could say was "je m'appelle Rouguiatou."

I didn't know much about torment back then but I can tell I was being put in the spot because I was different. Taking ESL (english as a second language) for 3 years made me feel like such a weirdo, getting pulled out of class while everyone watched didnt make me want to even go to school. I didn't let that get too much in my head though after a couple years because I passed the esl test in third grade and in

the end I was valedictorian in elementary school.

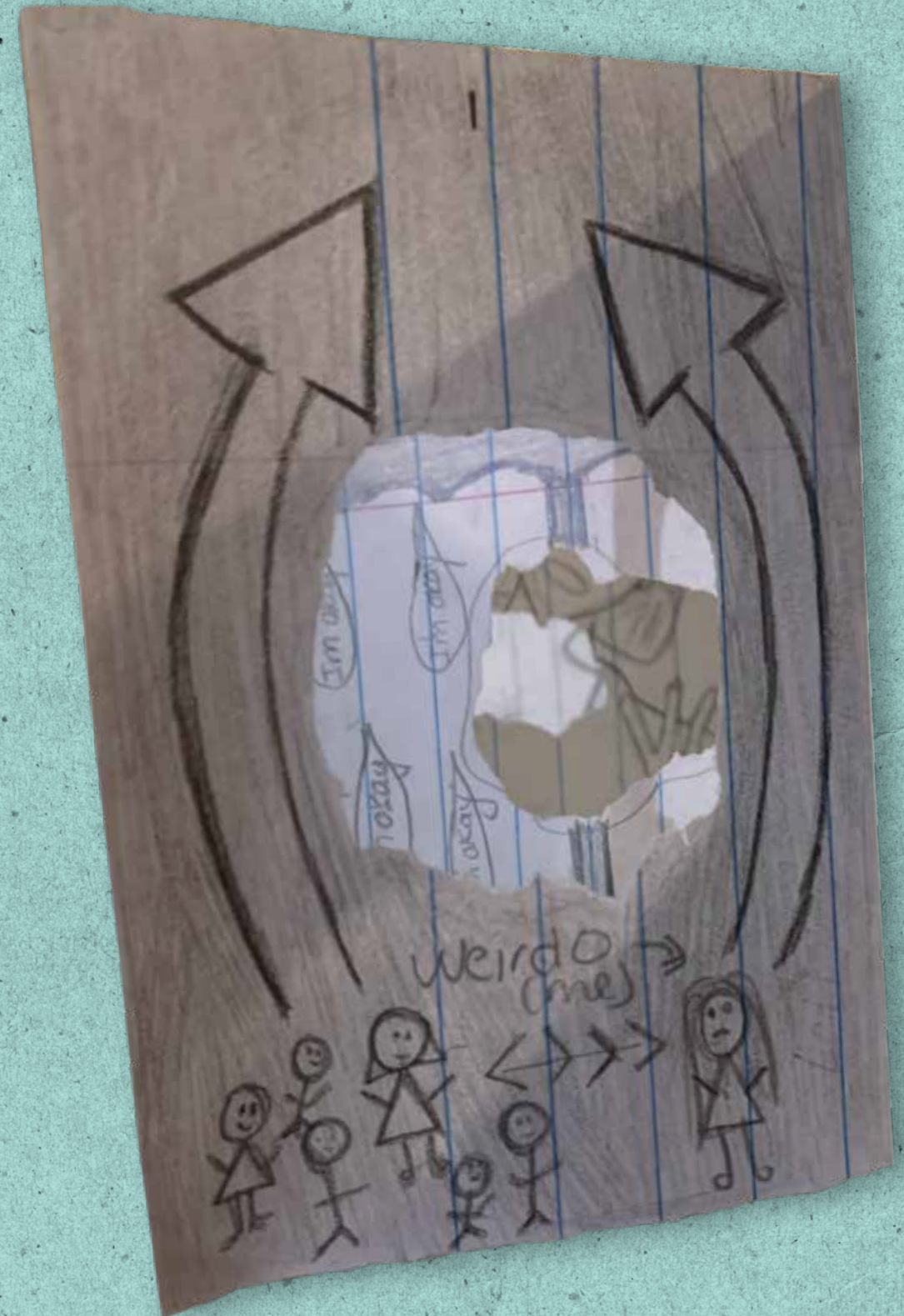
I'll never forget the screams, "Yessssss, Thats my girl", from my teachers. A moment i'll never forget.

I was also very , very clumsy. There were times where I would always fall and just get myself in trouble or hurt because of the dumb things I did. As a child I wasn't worried about how others felt about me or stressing about the future and college. Life was so much more simpler. These traits didn't really change throughout middle school because I still wanted to be friends with everyone and be liked. Middle school was more of trying to find out what kind of person I am, because I've always been a hardworking student since I was a child, but finding my true identity. Teachers helped shape me into a more independent person but I was more so still a child because I wasn't mature, But then high school came and it flipped my whole perspective.

When high school began I was excited to finally be a part of the beginning of my young adulthood. Walking into those double doors.

Teacher waiting at the door for your arrival saying "Welcome to 10th grade, I'm so excited to be your teachers."

But it went completely left, the new me was stressed, scared and unhappy. Me and all the friends that I had in middle school didn't really use to talk anymore everyone was changing to fit in and the school work stressed me out causing me to break out and just overall open my eyes. There was so much drama that wasn't necessary around me and that affects me a lot because I'm never in problems. I started to be insecure with how I look and felt because other



## Rouguiatou, cont.

people looked better than me, overall high school just blew away my self esteem.

Hearing things like “her body is so nice.”

“She looks way better.”

Made me look down on myself.

These words just turned down my confidence because I was concerned about why I didn't look like that. High school was a part of the reason that changed me so much because you really have to think about yourself whether it sounds selfish or not. Most of the kids you enter highschool with you won't even talk to after graduation so why waste time trying to please them. Developing this new mindset in the beginning of 10th grade was so refreshing it made socializing in school easier. The past year really changed my perspective in life and made me realize that you have to do things that benefit you and only have positive people who support you by your side.

You have to live your you life and not worry about what others think because you will be the only one in your grave no one else.

Now, I characterize myself as an independent and laid back chill person instead of wanting to talk to everyone because some people are really negative and can't be trusted. I have learned to be more independent and work hard for the things I want. Not be afraid to take chances and risk and adjust to changes in a positive way. To not always expect so much from others so that I can do it on my own with gods help. I've come to the realization that changing isn't always bad, it can be growth which is why I'm glad I changed. I wouldn't imagine that the child me would be this mature right now but I'm proud of the young adult I've become. ♥

## Bruce

### What Not to Do in an Interview Process

December 21st, 2019. This day marks the day I received an invitation to participate in an interview from an opportunity that I seized. Th is invitation happened shortly after I answered multiple question regarding my interest in a program. Nonetheless, I felt a surge of multiple feelings.

I felt excited because this possible new learning experience would surely help me academically and socially.

I felt optimistic because I took action and finally pursued an opportunity that would help me better prepare for college.

I felt anxious because I wasn't sure if I would succeed in the interview.

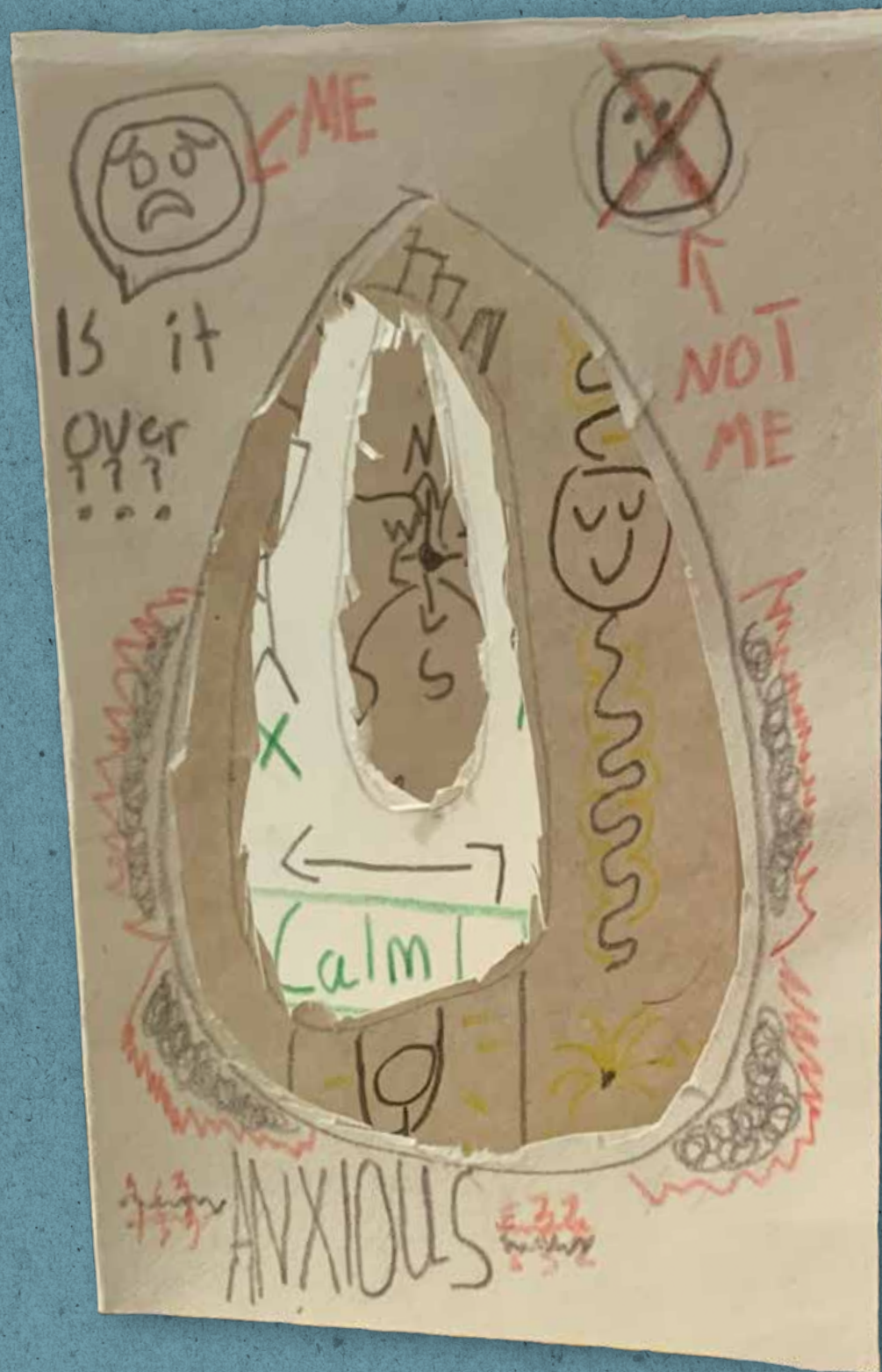
You see, I had a problem worrying about the uncertainty of the future constantly. I didn't want to humiliate myself in an interview by either making the conversation awkward, stuttering, or not knowing what to say. Luckily, I didn't let my negative thinking take over my decision making, else I wouldn't end up where I am today. With the help of my older sister, I signed up for the interview. January 11, 2020, would mark the day of my interview, so I had enough time to prepare. Except, I don't vividly remember practicing the answers to simple, frequent questions that are always asked in most interviews. I can recall answering some of these questions such as “what's your greatest strength?” or “how would you describe yourself?” in my head, without

taking notes to retain the answers to these questions. These answers became vague, and I didn't put any effort into strengthening the quality of my answers. Procrastination became my enemy on the battlefield of my brain, and I kept losing.

“I'll practice the next day,” became the catchphrase my brain used. Before I consciously knew, there were only a few days before the interview. No practice, no advice, and overall no preparation transpired. I grew very anxious and worried about the outcome. Exactly one day before the interview, I started practicing some of the answers to interview questions that are commonly asked, but this time I wrote my answers in a notebook so that I can retain the information. Additionally, I watched YouTube videos showcasing last-minute tips for interviews; unfortunately, I don't recall taking any of the tips into action, except for asking questions.

My day establishes on a rough start the day of the interview. My older sister told me to get changed into my business casual clothes. I quickly rushed to my closet to skim through the variety of options of clothing I could wear. I grabbed a blue buttoned-down shirt filled with white polka-dots and a generic-looking pair of black pants along with an inexpensive black suit. One issue already arose. I became shocked and disappointed when my pants didn't fit me; I had the wrong size for these saggy pants. The worst part? I didn't have a belt.

Fast forward, me and my sister arrived in Lower Manhattan, and I must say, I haven't been in this part of Manhattan for months, maybe even years. When we arrived inside, the clerk told us to wait 10-15 minutes, but it seemed like an hour.



## Bruce, continued.

I attempted to think in a positive manner, but my anxiousness created too much shakiness for my hands, and I became busy worrying about the uncertainty of the future. I definitely wished to learn the basic breathing meditation techniques I learned from watching YouTube videos much earlier because I would've definitely calmed down. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Luckily for me, I wasn't the only one feeling negative. As I walked upstairs and sat down, I glanced at my eyes to scan the room. A group of people socialized and played on the whiteboard while I sat awkwardly on a nearby table with a few people doing the same.

"Hey, would you like to play with us to pass the time? Feel free to join in."

I appreciated the welcoming offer, but I remained seated. None of the interviewees around me didn't have the nerve to communicate or socialize, or at least they became afraid to speak first including myself.

After I waited more time, peeping my eyes in different directions and daydreaming, it became my turn to become interviewed. But before I began, three current SEO scholars greeted me. Thanks to these people, my anxiety slowly died, but I still couldn't keep 100% calm. These people offered me advice and their own testimonials about their experiences in the program, ultimately reminding me as to why I wanted to join this program.

"I joined this program because I wanted to have the extra support and be prepared for college".

"It's also because of the program's slogan itself: seizing every opportunity."

"Good afternoon Bruce." A senior high school student and an adult with affiliations to the SEO program introduced

themselves and welcomed me in a kindly manner. I responded, and the three of us sat down in comfortable chairs having a small conversation before the actual interview questions. All of a sudden, the pressure accelerated as fast as a Formula One car, and I'm not sure if the interviewers knew, but I certainly did.

"Tell me about yourself, Bruce."

My next question became, "what's your greatest strength and weakness?"

Quickly after that, "what's one piece of work that you think reflects your hard work?"

I did my best to answer them with honesty and confidence. I know I struggled to respond to some of these questions because I wasn't prepared, and I wasn't confident in the ideas I shared; I wasn't used to being vulnerable about my weaknesses.

"I'm shy and quiet, don't like doing group work as much" became the summary of my response.

I'm not sure how long my interview lasted, but I became glad that it came to an end. My nerves eased as I started regaining calmness.

"Bruce, I will use these notes to advocate for your acceptance into the program."

Once again, my interviewers acted very generously, and I thanked them. My prolonged anxious mood came to an end. After I finished the rest of the interview process, I met up with my older sisters outside the office building, and we journeyed home.

Normally, I would listen to music during the subway rides, but I instead reflected on my experience as an interviewee. I realized this experience became a turning point in my life from childhood to young adulthood. Why do I

## Bruce, continued

believe this? It's because this event itself faces a similar scenario as to what an actual interview setting may look like for an actual job. Young adults face these situations, not many young children do. This event gave a glimpse of the future; my future. I took this event as a somewhat practice-test to see if I'm ready to participate in an interview and get accepted by a hiring manager. However, I saw myself being anxious but tried to calm and adopt a growth mindset in the end. Whether I am accepted or not, there must've been something that I could have worked on. In this case, I should've practiced answering common interview questions, I should've known the wardrobe for the professional interview, and I should've been calmer with the way I handled myself.

In conclusion, the moral of my story is to be prepared, take action, and don't procrastinate, especially when it comes to stressful scenarios such as an interview.

If I allowed myself to practice answering basic interview questions as soon as possible, if I allowed myself to think ahead of time, if I allowed myself to say "no" towards my distractive iPhone filled with a lifetime supply of content, if I allowed myself to say "yes" towards preparation and practice, my mentality would be as sharp as a Spartan's spear. It's astonishing how people can learn from their mistakes and challenges after one event.

A few weeks after the interview, I would receive an email notifying my acceptance to the SEO Scholars program. The roller coaster interview process, which took place on January 11, 2020, resulted in a positive outcome. Would I have changed anything in the past between the invite and the acceptance? Definitely. As I have learned in life: "there's always room for improvement." ♥

## Moustafa

### Grow Up

When I was 10 years old, my three older siblings, the three people I looked up to, left my life in a way to go to Africa. I'm the fourth of 7 kids. I was living in a neighborhood where everyone knew my whole family and I knew everyone. In this neighborhood my nickname was G-baby and they called me that cause I looked like a character from a movie and I was a bad little boy. This neighborhood was almost made for me and my family and we were like hood famous. Then it was time to leave this behind them with my three older siblings and it was time for a new chapter, a new neighborhood, new friends, new everything. It was time for me to go from the middle child to now being the older brother.

At that point in my life, everything was going great. I had my friends, family, and basketball with me every day. We were in the summertime and school was out. I'm playing basketball every day with my brothers and friends. Then one thing that made me happy was about to leave me for at this point I don't know how long. MY father and mother decided to take my three older siblings to Africa to read the Quran and meet family. Me being young at this point I knew that a lot of things were gonna change. For example, I went outside with my brothers, and now that they were not here I can't go outside. I played basketball with my brothers and if they were here I can't play basketball. So now my whole summer is ruined.

Fast forward to the new school year, and everything was going great. This was the longest I had been without my brothers, but now I was the bigger brother being blamed for everything. MInd you, I was only 10 and the pressure was on me being watched by my younger siblings.

Every.  
Single.  
Minute.

Toward the end of the school year, my mom and my dad felt that it was time to move to a different neighborhood. There were only like 2 months of school left. At this moment, I felt like everything I had, every friend I had, and every memory I had was about to be gone like a person in an empty room.

In less than a year, I had lost my brothers and now the neighborhood where I grew up, where all my friends were, and where I made memories was about to be gone. Since I had 2 months of school left I finished the school year at my school. I had to wake up every day early to travel with my dad to my aunt's house then to school. This was a very long and difficult 2 months because I had to do a lot more just to go to school.

When I finally got to my new neighborhood, it was during the summertime which made it the worst because now I was a new kid in a new neighborhood during the summertime. New everything all around me. So I hadn't had time to make friends during the school year cause I was still at my old school. Now it was time for me to do something that I didn't know how to do because I never had to do it before: make new friends.

My parents told me straight up that now I wasn't a baby and I had to step up to being a big brother and the oldest at the house. I was no longer a baby or "G-baby" and parents were sending me to the store, they made me a babysitter and I even got in trouble for everything that happened in my life outside of babysitting. I was now the role model and I now had to watch my every move. I later realized that this meant that I went from being a child to then being a young adult. It occurred to me that it gave me more maturity and responsibility that makes me who I am today. ♥

# Jeremiah

## About My Weight

My Father's home, maybe around when I was in 6th grade (12 yrs old) there were other Family members over. As a kid I wasn't very aware of my weight nor did I care about What anyone would say about it but this moment here For some reason changed the Way I looked at myself as a kid.

So as the party was still active I went into the kitchen to grab a drink until one of dad's Friends stopped me and asked how I was doing, of course I replied With the usual "It's Been going good." Then my Dad looked at me funny then he asked me "Have you gained Weight?"

Or something close to that, my Dad and his friend kept commenting on my big Stomach (I had eaten earlier) And poking me too making me think more about my Weight, I went back inside the room questioning myself "What's wrong with what I look?" "Should I eat less?" "Maybe I'm gaining too much?"

Then my brother entered the conversation too he jokingly said "You put on a few pounds".

I of course shrugged off but for the rest of time I was there I became more and More self conscious about my body image ultimately making me silent until I went Home.

I went into my room and contemplated on my bed my next steps in life, just those words Alone made me rethink my entire eating lifestyle. On monday when I was in school I Was bitter the whole day I just couldn't get those words out of my mind, it

was like a Mosquito that won't stop buzzing you until you finally did something about it but in my Case I didn't have the courage to do anything "Maybe I should avoid eating for the rest Of the day Heck, I'll probably do this tomorrow as-"

I hear someone calling my name. "Jeremiah you okay? You seem depressed."

My friend Alex, snapped me back into reality knowing that I'm obviously depressed. I Look him in the eye and say the opposite.

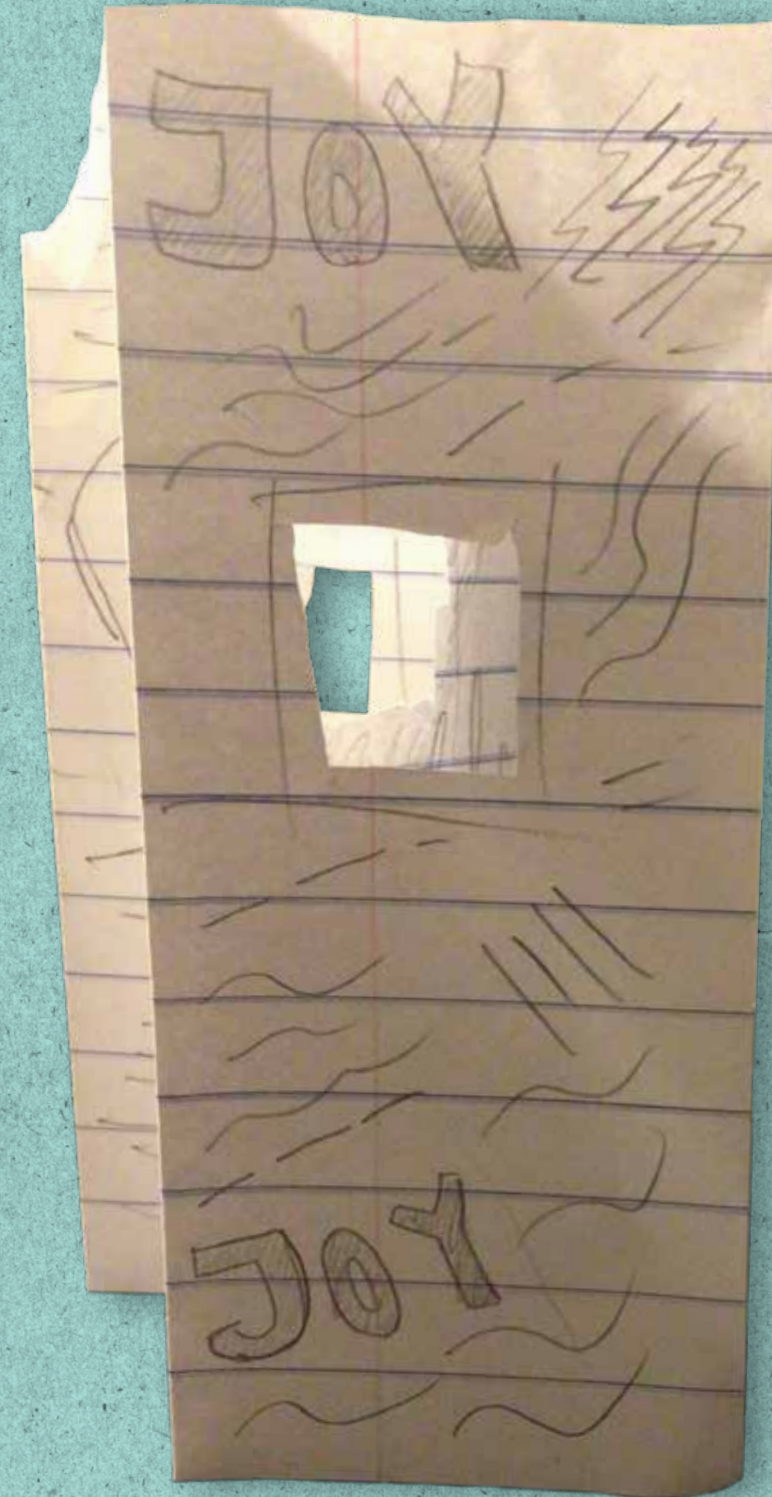
"Of course I'm fine. Why would you think I'm ever depressed?" I say with the worst acting ever.

"I don't know you just seemed depressed but whatever." Alex goes back to his Regular routine of being rich as I continue on with my day worrying more and more About my weight gain.

As soon as I got home I wanted to deal with this problem immediately so I devised a Plan to eat less so I won't gain much weight. My mom caught sight of this a few days Later and tried asking me What was wrong. Of course I gave her the same answer I said To alex.

"Boy." My mom says, sucked her teeth and walked out the kitchen.

During the end of the month I've lost all hope what my Dad and Brother said really stuck With me for a while it hurts more knowing the fact that one of you family members said That about you, in front of your face and other family members making the scene Embarrassing luckily, I found a silver-lining, my friends encouraged me to not to be so Down about my weight and instead use that as a inspiration tool. "You're not even Fat, your body looks good."



## Jeremiah, continued

My friend king said to me, "You should hit the exercise room on Saturdays to Workout with us Jeremiah, join us."

My other friend Simon said to me of course we weren't even going to work out We'll just play smash bros in the cafeteria like during school days. In order to maintain My weight I have workout and eat how I normally eat, I could feel my eyes widened just Like the sun in the early morning, that the weight problems I was having was getting to My head and the only reason it became a massive issue was because I let it become One instead of using it as inspiration to help me in the future.

3 years have past since my dilemma back in 6th grade and I exercise most of the time To keep myself in shape, I of course eat regularly but gaining weight is normal when Eating food. I get back into my room after eating with my family, I look up from my bed And think about how my life would have changed indefinitely if I had a negative body Image of myself, it was a good thing I have such amazing friends to help guide me on The right path. ♥

## Jonathan

### Turning Point

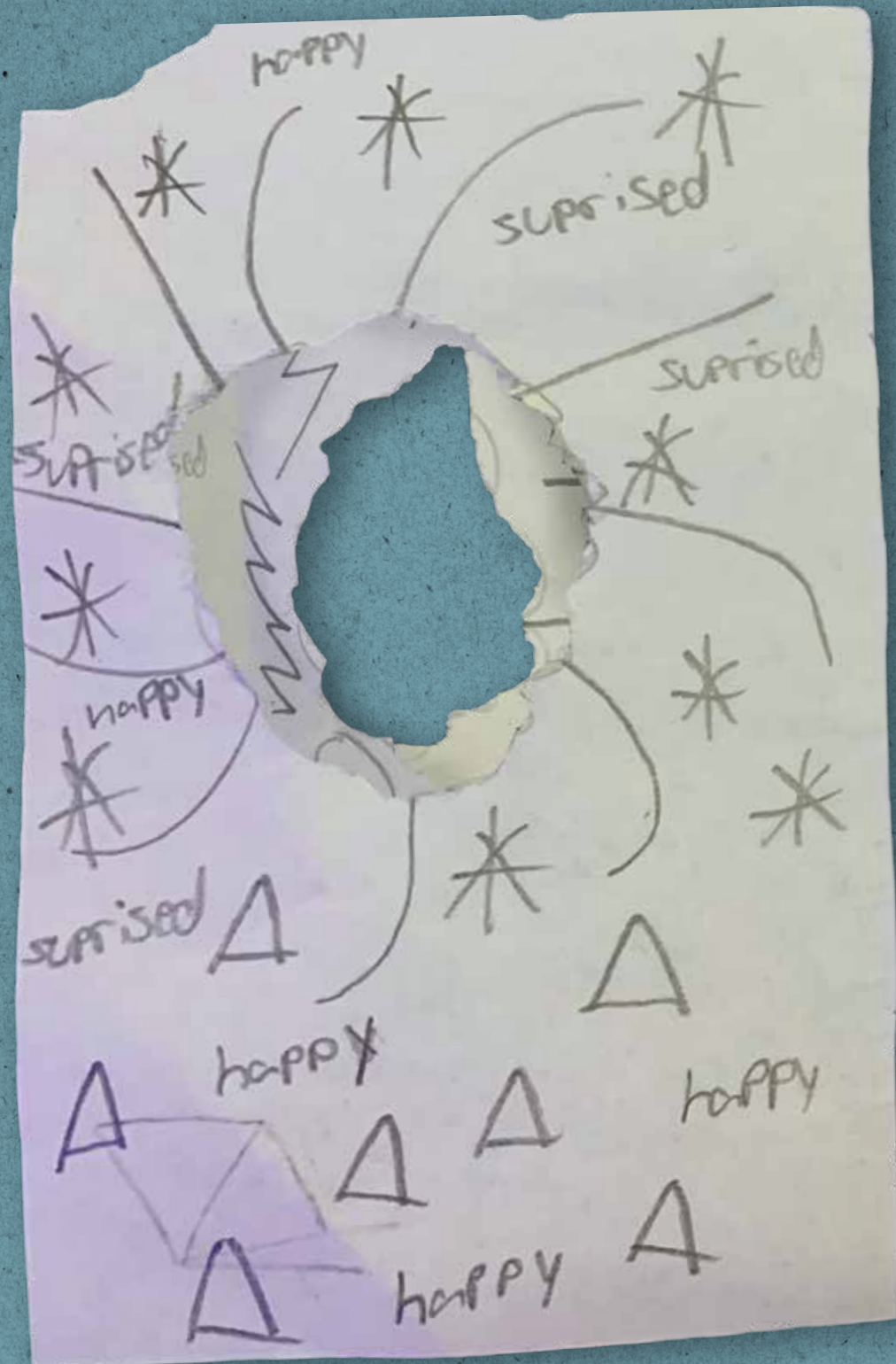
I was at an event somewhere in Harlem and the friends I was with left early, I then left an hour or two after them. I was planning on using google maps but, unfortunately my phone had died. Now, with no technology and a couple miles away from home, I had to find my way back somehow, I then started to ask around, a woman who seemed to be in her late 40's was waiting for a bus, I walk over to her and ask what bus stops here. She tells me about the 5 bus. So, I then ask if the bus stops in front of riverbank, because I knew if I could get to Riverbank I could get home, all I'd need to do after riverbank was get on the 19 bus. She says no, the bus she's waiting on goes the opposite way but, right across the street there was a 5 bus pulling up, without hesitation I thank the lady and cross the street.

"Can I get a free ride?" I ask the bus driver, there are a couple seconds of awkward silence and then he declines. I wasn't going to wait for another bus it was already starting to get dark so, I thank him anyways walk out and, jog towards the back door of the bus and sneak to the back. After all that, sure enough the bus stops

me in front of riverbank, I hop out transfer to the 19 bus and, make it home.

I know that with the maturity level I had as a child I would've panicked as soon as I notice my phone die, I would've freaked out and, probably made my situation worse. But I was able to remain calm and think of a solution to get back home. This moment just changed my way of thinking, it just really showed me that asking for help is always an option, there are many people in this world and, they all have something to offer even if it's something as simple as public transportation directions or, advice about school.

This story here is just a small example but maturity is a big part of growing up, maturity comes in many forms, we need maturity in our everyday lives, in our jobs, for school and, all types of everyday things. Being a young adult is much different than being a child, there is a very dramatic change in how we act, our social life and, much more. If I were to name the characteristics of me when I was child, they would be the exact same characteristics I have now. Except I am more mature but, overall my traits remained the same. I'll never forget my first time on public transportation alone. ♥



## Randy

### Untitled

A moment for me when i knew i was coming of age was when my mother gave me my own debit card. It's funny, just a little card right? How could that make me come of age? But for me it meant everything.

I thought I was the same age as everyone around me. I remember going out and deciding to spend so much money and buy whatever I wanted but that was what I thought right?

i didnt know how rong i was because a few years later and im wanting things that are actually important to me like clothes or food and as a teenager i looking at my younger self like wow i cant believ i did this i was so dumb.

So I would say my turning point was probably when I had no money in my debit card and I had to realize I needed priorities and to spend my money wisely. I remember

a couple weeks ago reflecting on it and it just surprised me when I realized I used to impulse buy and compared to me now I just buy things that are important to me and have a benefit in the long run.

I was with my brother and I remember we were at a food place and I blew my money on food. At the moment i felt good because i was using my own money for my own food. A few weeks later I was with my mom and she gave me the chance to buy some sneakers but then I opened my account and realized that there was no money in my account and in that moment I was flooded with so many emotions, anger, and sadness. That was when I figured out that I need priorities when it comes to money. I thought this because if i never bought food then i would have been able to buy the sneakers i wanted and how i need to think of when i buy something will it benefit me in the long run or just in the moment. ♥



# Jocalyn

## Heard

“Don’t mess up.. Don’t mess up!”. These three words were like a broken record in my head. They always say picture everyone in their underwear but what if you’re the only one in your underwear? All of these unfamiliar faces, even though these are familiar places. Feeling like a teacher, everyone looking to me for the answers. I didn’t realize my heart was a NASCAR track the way it’s racing. Continually checking my phone seeing how long I have left in this nightmare.

“Time to head back!” Mr.Sherman, my principal says like he’s speaking to a pep rally. It’s like we’re playing “following the leader” the way everyone is looking to me for direction; we head down the stairs back to the library. I can feel how I resemble a tomato once I get back to my seat.

“You okay?” Mrs.McGee, my 8th grade english teacher, asked me, laughing to herself.

Time to go up there, up there being in front of all the adults in the room. I’m in a program for young boys and girls. We learn about how to protect ourselves in this world, learning the ways to stay out of trouble and how to be presentable.

I went to a diverse school. However, it seemed that black people were the minority. There were many people of South Asia background as well as a hispanic

background. This was the case in the body of students. Many of the teachers were white. Some were black, some hispanic, and the rest were a mix. But again they were mostly white.

Because there weren’t a lot of people like me, it tended to feel like there wasn’t a large amount of representation. Fortunately, I had a black english teacher. She took an interest in me personally and we created a close relationship. In her class we spoke about social justice as well as the difference between equality and equity. I never really had the opportunity to learn about these topics and I had no idea what equity was.

In her class she made sure we spoke about these topics because they are important. There was already a group for the young men in my school and she wanted to create one for the young ladies as well. This program is intended for minority students, in order to teach us things that we would otherwise have to learn the hard way. When asking for my opinion, she also asked if i’d be willing to attend.

At first I was undecided about it because of the other girls that would be there but I decided that I’d attend anyways, just to see what I could learn. Being selected for this program really made my eyes open to the fact that I was growing up.

“Why as a kid would I need to learn about equity and equality?” I thought to myself. Knowing everything I know now, it is an essential part of becoming a young adult. In hindsight, all of these things were unspoken things that I was already aware of.

Nevertheless, learning about them then, I started to see that this world is very unkind to people like my friends and I. On top of that, I was speaking to adults about the way I felt as well as changes I’d like to see in the world. I think that this was a really big deal for me because at the time, I didn’t really have a platform where I could express my feelings. Along with this program, I was introduced to several different opportunities to voice my opinions whilst teaching students that were younger than me.

A big moment from my 8th grade year was reading a paper aloud in front of a gymnasium filled with teachers and other school faculty. The task was to explain what being a teacher looked like to me. I wrote this paper, voicing my opinions and these people applauded me. Teachers came up to telling me how I gave them a different perspective on what teaching was.

I spoke about what it means to be a teacher. Teachers have a huge impact on our lives. We spend almost a third of our whole day with them. In that time there’s so much they can teach us. They have a large influence on how we conduct ourselves and the way we think. We trust them with our thoughts and feelings. So it’s their job to use that knowledge in order to make us better people. We are the future and they have the change to mold the kind of future they want to see.

However, the performance was horrendous and I have second hand embarrassment after looking back on this memory. I was nervous and not used to public speaking. All in all, I’ve grown a lot in the two years since 8th grade. But this year as a whole was a turning point for me.

I have a voice and I realize that now. I use it to speak up for myself in addition to the people who I also speak for. I stopped worrying so much about what others thought and started to live life for myself. I changed my friends and my style. I’m more comfortable with myself and it has helped me be more confident in my abilities. I’m not as nervous as I used to be when speaking publicly. Others still say I turn into a tomato but now I can be molded into all the tomato by products. ❤️

# Michelle

## Change is Scary

As a young child, I had very different traits than as a young adult. My family reminds me every day how much I've changed. My Mom never stops telling me she misses her little girl. I was a shy and creative child to my peers and teachers at school. I didn't like being called on in class and I wouldn't like meeting new people, that's why I'd say I was shy. I had a super creative mind as well. Every few months I'd have a new hobby whether it was making wallets out of pretty duct tape or crafting everything in my doll house when my Mom would tell me she's not buying anymore doll furniture. I can go on and on about the hobbies I let take up my free time.

"You always had a new thing for me to spend money on." - a quote from my Mom today when I asked about it. It's true that another thing, I was spoiled. Yes, a spoiled brat. This isn't part of how I realized I was no longer a child, but it could be. When I started paying for my own stuff, you could say that was a scary change (lol.) Don't get me wrong, I can still have my shy moments and my creative ideas from time to time today, just not as much. One thing I'd say I still do that changed from my childhood is go through friends. I've always been a real person and even saw through any fake friendship as a child just like now. I started cutting people off for lying to me in the 3rd grade, yes the 3rd grade. I'd bounce around new friends every few months, still keeping a little number of old ones, just like now. This has definitely developed trust issues for me, which I do not forgive myself for.

"Go childhood me."

To my family, I was also controlling and dramatic. I'd want everything my way and couldn't ever just go with the flow (I told you, spoiled brat.) They'd use the word dramatic because I tended to string along situations and go over them over and over again, constantly bringing up when something bothered me. I guess this is where my author instinct comes from. Now, I'm a little more nonchalant and listen to others more, giving others ideas a chance. Some more traits I exhibit now as a young adult are extroverted, blunt, and caring. My friends and family all said extroverted or something similar when I asked. I totally agree, I speak up way more in public places and do well meeting new people. As the google definition says, I would say I am, "outgoing and socially confident." Sometimes you just have to give me a minute, anti-social and anxious Michelle does come out of hiding once in a while. I've also been told many times that I am blunt, not honest, but blunt. This is because I'm very likely to say what I'm thinking without reassuring the nicest way possible before saying it out loud. I also have these facial expressions that I can't control sometimes when I don't like someone or something going on. It's a bad and good trait if you think about it. I'm always telling the truth, just not sugarcoating the way I should to some people. I should take people's sensitivities in consideration, and trust, I am working on it. I do not like being seen as a mean girl. That introduces my next trait, caring. I am super caring when it comes to the people closest to me. I always make sure they're good and create a safe space for any of my people to come to me. Not only that, but I'm also very protective. I get in situations



## Michelle, continued.

that aren't mine to protect the ones I love most. I definitely get this trait from my Mom, as she does the same exact thing.

I started to realize my childhood was starting to end the summer before freshman year. I had just turned 14 that July. I have a baby face but during this time my face was a little chubbier and clearer. Looking back on videos and pictures from that time period is really weird for me now, I miss it. There was this one specific day though, I was where I'm at right now, my room. I was with my best friend Justin. I met Justin in middle school and we became super close during 8th grade. We spent the whole summer together. When I say the whole summer, I mean we literally saw each other everyday. He sat at my desk and I sat on my bed, we wondered what we should do that day. Then it occurred to us, we haven't spoken to a lot of our friends since school ended. We then had a short conversation of realizing we are no longer children after registering the fact that everybody we'd known since elementary school would be moving on.

"We should call Lani, we haven't seen her since the last day of school." Justin said.

"We tried calling her last week, remember she's in Atlanta and she told us her phone was broken." I responded.

"Right. What about... Steven?" He suggested.

"He's been hanging out with all those people from his new school. He barely texts me." I acknowledged.

As Justin named people we'd plan our summer with during the school year, a thought popped into my head that I immediately shared.

"Are we seriously each other's only friend?" I said. Justin looked up from his phone with a serious face. Our serious faces didn't last long when we bursted laughing 3 seconds later.

"I guess we are. Wow, I miss everybody." He finally answered, letting go of the last giggle at the end of his sentence.

"Me too. I knew this would happen. All those days during after school talking about what we'd be busy doing together when it's summertime, what a waste."

"You know, we're going to different schools, what if it happens to us?" Justin says to me.

"Why would you say something like that? I'd never just as long as you never." I said, chuckling.

"You're the one that likes to make friends." He responds, letting go another laugh.

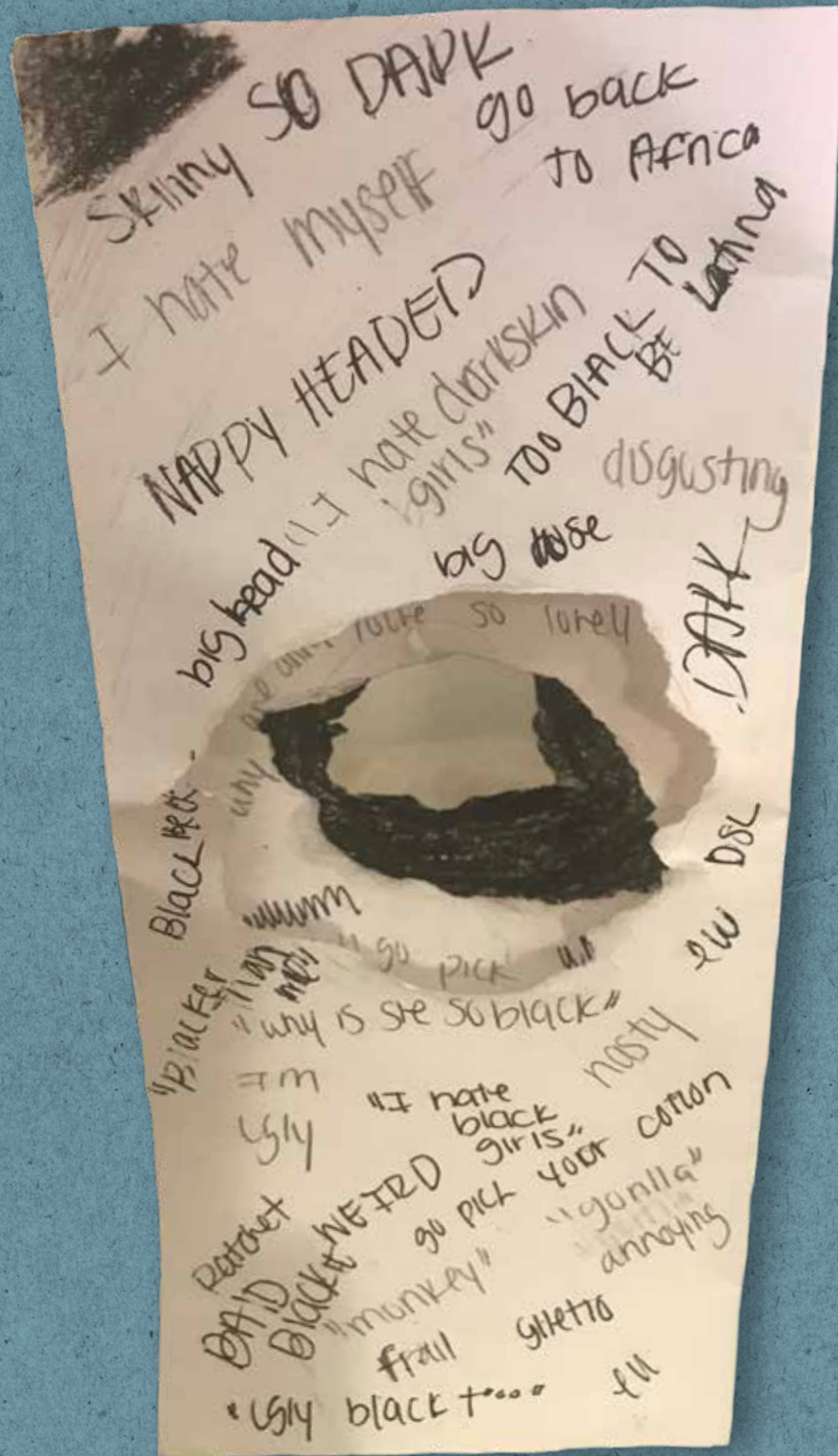
That summer I introduced Justin to all the potential friends I made when I attended the summer program. This way he'd meet new people with me. Justin isn't somebody who likes meeting new people, so we balanced each other out.

"Whatever. Everyone is really going to make new friend groups this year. I hate just thinking about it." I said, the corners of my mouth went down, creating a small frown.

"Ugh, lets stop-Want to go to Mary's?" He brought up our regular daily plans to take my mind off the subject since he knows I don't like change.

The rest of the day not only did my mind run with thoughts about our short conversation. I couldn't help thinking about my best friend moving on as well. I think if I fully stopped talking to Justin, my childhood would leave with him. Sounds dramatic but I lost many close friends since then and I still call him up every now and then since he lives in New Jersey now due to the pandemic. What hurt me the most was losing my friendship with this one girl. She was very important to my middle school self so I'd say that's the only friendship I still reminisce about and miss. The thought of everybody moving on was scary. I wasn't ready to let go of the innocence and memories I'd experience those years. Most importantly, I was ready to lose my friends.

Looking back at it now, I just want to tell myself, "you're going to be okay, you'll find new friends and learn to hang out alone sometimes." you know? As children, we either think the thought of growing up is scary or we can't wait. I was a child who was scared to grow and to do things on my own. The end of childhood is something that is reflected on very often. Nostalgia gets the best of us and we end up reminiscing. However, living in the past is just something I don't like doing, I like acting on things I can control and two things I can control are now and the future. Even though change is scary, it is also ALWAYS a good thing if you look at it that way. That super cliché phrase, "Everything Happens for a Reason," is the most fulfilling way of living. ♥



## Roselyn

### The Illusion of Loneliness

An apartment filled with 6 people, constant screams and laughs filled up in the ear. A kitchen always filled with food, rooms with TV's playing my favorite cartoon at the time, it made my childhood feel complete. As a child, I was energetic and enjoyed having fun with everyone around me. Some would even describe me as annoying but I didn't seem to mind. I was also described as intelligent, learning basic vowels, and counting up to 10 at a very young age. My childhood was something I have always seemed to enjoy, no worries and always having fun. If I could go back in time to my childhood again I would, it was so fun and I was able to enjoy myself with my friends and/or family. When in elementary school, I still acted the same up until graduation.

Things started to change for me as I got to middle school dealing with the criticism from mostly the boys in my class, being called degrading names which changed the way I thought about myself.

"monkey."

"dirty African. It used to happen to my friends as well since we were all dark-skinned.

The pretty light-skinned girls made me feel jealous thinking "Why can't I receive compliments and attention just like them?"

Middle school completely broke my self-esteem down just because I was afro-Latina. Nobody in my family seemed to notice because I never told them, I didn't want that situation to seem like a burden to them. It was hard, taking in all the comments

made about the skin I thought was beautiful. I started to feel horrible about myself and being dark even if I received compliments from people. It never satisfied me because I knew that I will always be an ugly black girl to someone. Other events in middle school caused me to be mean to others, made me toxic, and feel even uglier about myself. Middle school was fun some of the time, but I never wanted to be there in fear that I will be made fun of for my skin color again.

High school was better than the experiences I previously had in middle school. Nobody made fun of my skin so I was happy about that and started to gain confidence. There were people around me who still got more attention than me, which made me feel smaller and less important. I feed on attention because it makes me feel wanted no matter what kind of attention it is. Overall, the environment was much better for someone like me but that doesn't mean anything bad didn't happen. My acne was getting worse, my hair was getting damaged and I was toxic. My mental state in 9th grade was horrible.

Now that I'm in 10th grade, my parents mostly describe me as a gloomy, antisocial person who always locks themselves in their room even though I feel a little happier about myself. I've come a long way in dealing with these situations by myself, but I still feel gloomy. Knowing how the world views girls like me makes me feel horrible but I am always able to hide it. Even when I look in the mirror, I still see the ugly dark girl I was in middle school. My chest feels hollow as I try to see a better outlook in everything surrounding me but it sometimes doesn't seem to work. The bitter loneliness and the melancholy atmosphere is surrounding me like a cloud, it only makes me hope that I am no longer this way. One day, I aspire to be truly happy with myself even if nothing turns out the way I'd like it. ♥

## My Guilty Pleasure

I was a 10-year old fifth grader and up to standard scholar at P.S. 154 who was counting down the days until I outgrew the environment I have been in since preschool. January of 2016, students and parents were informed of middle school applications, a procedure that required students to have an open mind. The Laboratory School Of Finance and Technology was presented as “the best school of the district” and as soon as my school got informed about it, began a very competitive journey for all students.

“Wow, that school is the BEST!?”

“Yeah, I want to go there, I’m putting it first on my application”

“I’m anxious, what if I didn’t meet the requirements to get accepted at my first choice school?” I thought to myself. My overthinking couldn’t stop.

Mrs. Gross with her blonde hair as a lush summer sunrise and her rich and soft brown eyes, just like chocolate, pulled me to a conference to update me on what middle school I will be attending in the fall.

“I tried my best to get you into a good middle school with everything you’ve achieved here.” She sighed, as if she was disappointed by my middle school acceptance letter.

I did not put too much thought into it, “How can my hard work not pay off and reflect me when I need it the most?”

I got handed my acceptance letter and I did not resist tearing open that envelope like a baby wouldn’t resist yanking off the candy wrapper of a lollipop. A soft smile on my face that yelled excitement and a warm long hug to my guidance counselor for the luck I had getting accepted to my first choice, F&T. No matter how large of a proportion of my classmates applied to F&T, not many were fortunate enough to get accepted.

Transitioning to middle school was frightening. A lot of new faces that I could hide in between but not blend in with, I stood there like an outsider. My school year was different this time around. I was so intimidated by the new faces wandering around the long hallways, three levels of staircases, and classrooms. I had to hold myself accountable for my academics and for my behavior as well, but what I desired and prioritized more at the time was making new friends. I wouldn’t go straight home after school, instead I would hang out with friends and getting in trouble once I got home didn’t bother me because I had already done it and continued to disobey.

“Tu hermano que está más grande que tú, se viene directo a casa cuando sale del escuela y usted señorita que apenas empezó el bachillerato te estás portando así?” my Mom exclaimed.

My Mom going ahead favoriting my brother and asking me to behave like him, it was like I couldn’t have friends because I couldn’t come home whenever. Parent teacher conference was right around the corner for the second marking period of 6th grade, I was unaware of how I was doing in school.

My second oldest sister passed by the school for parent teacher conferences while I took advantage of dismissal being early, to hang out with friends.

“Mira, ella no está haciendo bien en la escuela” she explained to my parents as she showed them the grades and teacher comments on my report card.

“How bad can it be? I’ve always done good in school, she’s so dramatic” I whispered to myself carelessly.

Looking at my report card was like looking at a ghost.

“I promise you my grades will look better next year this time around” I cried.

I took advantage of my parents not disciplining me, but that was no excuse for them to see the drastic change in my behavior and grades. I had a goal, to get back on track. Failure and following others was not an option. If my friends weren’t interested in their academics as I, that was on them.

I asked my sister to take me to my parent teacher conference during 7th grade because I was confident in my grades. There I stood next to my sister pointing at my name on the assistant principal’s honor roll list, proudly.

Due to the hard work I was able to put, I made my sister and I proud. At the time it felt superior getting on the honor roll list for the first time, but there was no chance that I could stop advancing, it was my reason to strive and be the student that I am today. I was able to outgrow friends where losing them did not affect me negatively, myself along with my passions arose. You don’t need a friend who changes when you change and who nods when you nod, your shadow does that much better.



# Saratul

## Epiphany

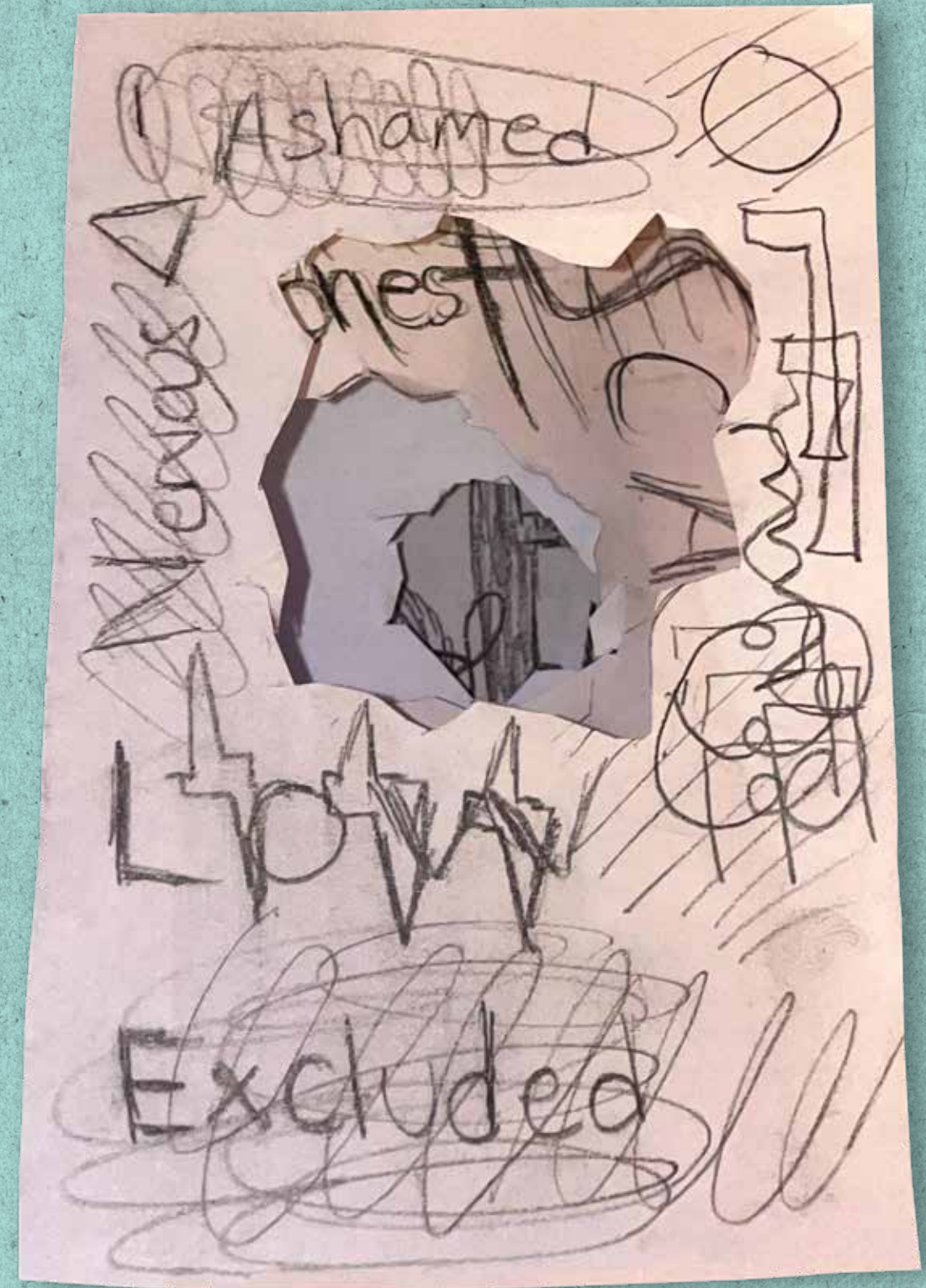
I grew up in the south Bronx with my two parents. At the time it was just me and my older sister, I was always to myself, especially at home. But during pre-k is when I started to have friends and talk to people a bit, but I was very shy. However, that all changed when my brother was born ( we are one year apart). We were inseparable, we always played with each other and fought like normal kids. I guess you can say he was my best friend because I finally had someone my age that I got to hangout with on a daily basis. Then after a couple of years me and my family moved and I had a fresh new start by going to a new school and meeting new people (which I still hate doing). Honestly, I was scared because I was shy and I'd only talk when spoken to. It was my first year starting kindergarten and first grade in this new school. I honestly don't remember how the first day went but what I do remember is people making fun of me because I was wearing a hijab. Which is clearly a part of my religion since I'm Muslim. I just remembered feeling so sad and I never said anything back because again, I was a shy kid. So, I decided to stop wearing the hijab completely and my mom was fine with it.

Conveniently, there was another school across the street and I had transferred to that school because it was a Charter school, thinking it would be better than the public school I was originally at. My younger brother also tagged along. My mom walked us to school everyday even though the school was 2 blocks away from

our home. I had just started second grade and after a while I had a couple of friends that I was close with, which is surprising because I don't talk first so I don't know how I made the friends that I had. I remember having this bestfriend and everytime I bought food she would always ask for it and I shared it with her. She made me feel comfortable. Skipping over to 5th grade, I had this bestfriend and he was a boy and I'd never forget this moment. One day we were sitting next to each other and he was just looking at me.

He said, "Have you ever thought about wearing makeup?" At first I was shook. In my head I was like, "wait what does he mean by that?" Is he trying to be offensive? Or? So I just gave him this look and said "no why?" and he said something along the lines of "because you would look better with it". So then that kind of just made me slightly insecure because I never really saw anything wrong with how I looked. So, for someone that I call a "bestfriend" to say that to me..it kind of hurts. I also had another boy bestfriend who was also friends with my other boy bestfriend and I remember he used to bully me all the time and make fun of my sneakers or my hair, etc. Then my other best friend would just be on the sidelines laughing. Everytime they said something about me I just acted like I didn't hear it. I really tried to ignore them and after that I never considered them as my best friends.

Here comes graduation and surprisingly I was very sad to leave the school because of certain friends and staff members, teachers, etc. But, at the same time I was very happy that I was leaving because I wouldn't have to deal with ignorant & mean people. But, I was wrong because in Middle school I dealt with it once again. I'm not going to lie,



## Saratul, continued.

6th grade was pretty okay because I had met new people and had a lot of friends. But towards 7th and 8th grade things kind of went downhill because there were these boys that used to always make fun of me and my group of friends. For the longest they've called us "Black b\*itches", "monkeys", "Africans" they even told some of us "go fetch fire for me". It was just a lot & some of the things they used to call us didn't even make sense because some of us weren't even African. It was like everytime me or my friends got into an altercation with the boys they would say those types of things. Or even mock us. But I noticed how my lighter friends never got called these names even though they were black as well. So, I was brainwashed into thinking that me and friends were the problem.

Honestly, looking back at some of the friends I had I realized I was too nice and considerate when I should've been blunt because half of the friends I had in middle school were fake. Honestly, you never really realize the fake & mean things people do until you really look back at it. For example, in 7th grade I got close to a girl we are going to name her "Rebecca" and I loved our friendship. Until much later when my group of friends didn't like her. But I didn't care because that was just the person I was. Just because my someone doesn't like you doesn't mean I have to stop liking you. So I continued to be her friend. Then one of my closest friends, we're gonna call her Julie, came up to me telling me that I should stop being Rebecca's

friend. Mind you this wasn't her first time telling me this, she had told me numerous times and I never listened because Rebecca had no one but me. But, guess what I did, I stopped being friends with Rebecca to please my friend. I honestly felt really bad. But here comes the fakeness. So in 8th grade guess who became best friends?! Julie & Rebecca! Honestly I was shocked but at the same time I wasn't because I'm not the type of person that's going to tell you who can or cannot be friends with. I just had that respect. But it was just fake because why would you beg me to stop being friends with her but then you turn around and become best friends with her?! After that, I just learned that people can be so fake and not put your feelings into consideration.

After Middle school, things really changed for me and I started looking at myself in a different light. It changed me because even now when I look back at the friends I used to have in middle school I feel disgusted. Not even the friends but just the people in general and the way they acted towards me. I also learned that as you get older and more mature like I did, you lose friends and you're really just not with the drama. Honestly, as I got older I realized the people that were mean to me in elementary school or middle school are now nice to me and try to talk to me. Which is weird, but I don't budge. It's actually kind of funny because it's really true "what goes around comes around". But, when recalling my childhood memories, there are so many stories like the happy ones and the sad ones. Even some that I don't remember. ♥

## Jonael

### The Power of a Child

A child's innocence is their wisdom. It's what gives them hope and prosperity for the cold and rigid future that awaits them. But what happens when that innocence that defines a child's life is taken away from them. They try to mature and adapt but the sudden changes hit them so hard they lie on the ground wondering. Wondering about a way to hit back and prove to themselves that they can hit harder than they were hit. I got up and hit harder.

I was 8 years old and skinny as a twig, but still full of pride and charisma. I went to a small school in the Bronx which meant teachers could pay more attention to you.

"Don't get too far ahead, Jonael,"

Teachers would always tell me since I would always read ahead to finish the work early. I would read and read as much I could, my father made sure of it. I was labeled gifted by teachers which gave me pride in what I do. But as smart as I thought I was, I failed to see what was in my face. The Bronx at the time was recovering from political hardships and summer of violence. I was oblivious to it. I was too busy making friends and reading books about frogs to even bat an eye.

I grew very curious trying to find some sort of explanation. The curiosity brought me to an answer. "Wanted" a book by Caroline B Cooney. It was about a girl who was accused of killing her father and is being framed by the killer but no one believes she's innocent even the police. Now she's on a path to prove her

innocence. The book caught my eye right away. I asked my teacher to borrow it but she gave me a confused glare.

"Jonael, I can't stop you from taking the book. It's very mature. Just be careful with it."

My excitement and naiveness overshadowed her words. I believed I could handle something I barely had experience with. I took the book home and showed my father. He said the book looked nice and to go on and read it. I opened the book to the first chapter and read...

"It's daddy Alice, Hi dad.."

And went off from there. The more I looked at the smaller details of the book, like Alice, the main character being happy in the beginning but gets progressively, scared and worried the more I realized life imitates art. The story felt like it ripped a page from my neighbor's books. My neighbor was accused of hurting someone she loved. No one believed her and it ripped her apart. The truth came out but her hope and passion were already gone. She watched me grow up and played with me when she could. Seeing the hope she once had, die in her eyes made me feel pathetic. From that moment I saw that dead look a lot from a lot of different people.

I always thought a bad day was the cause of it. I wasn't wrong, I just didn't get the whole thing then, a bad day led to another and a cycle starts. Every time I saw a person with that look I studied them trying to figure out what made them feel so sad. It took a while to get used to but it made conversing with them so much easier. Seeing that little shine of hope from me doing a stupid magic trick like making a coin disappear.

"Just like that a coin disappears and a smile takes its place."

## Jonael, continued.

A line I used to say to finish. The magic charade didn't last but the skills it taught me like reading people's emotions stayed. As time passed I matured.

The naiveness turned to open-mindedness.

The pride turned into humbleness.

Innocence turned into maturity and wisdom.

The skills I learned turned into a passion for writing and studying behavior. I never returned the book since it never left my mind. There comes a time when a child has to grow up, see through the lens of the adult they're becoming. My time hit me, and I hit it back. ♥

## Jacqueline

### Death is Powerful But Then There's Grief

School had started and I was in 2nd grade. I was maybe 6 or 7 years old and didn't really understand much. Honestly, I was very shy and wasn't a person to fit in with all the other kids. In 2nd grade, I probably had a few friends, at least 2 that I was close with. It was just a regular day in school, in my classes and just listening to the teacher on what to do because as a kid I didn't cause much trouble. All my classes had ended and I was picked up by my mom, while we were walking home, that's when she told me.

"Jacky tu tío está en el hospital, ahora mismo no sabemos como esta"

I didn't reply. I was worried though, I didn't know what to say so I just stood silent and hoped for the best. When we got home, I unpacked my stuff and changed into regular clothes instead of having to wear that basic uniform. I didn't know much to do but just think about the fact that I had a dream where something bad was going to happen and all of a sudden it was coming true, I was feeling lost in my dream and I saw my uncle asking for help. All he kept doing was asking for help and he just kept getting further and further to the point where I couldn't see him. Snowy and cold, and yet he disappeared within air in my dreams. I thought to myself

"Why is my uncle in the hospital? Is he going to be okay? I should maybe ask to go see him and to see how he's doing."

I went to my mom and asked her if we can go to the hospital to see my uncle.

"Ma, podemos ir a ver a mi tío?" I asked.  
"Si hija, tu tía y tus primos van a ir también" she said

Once she told me that we can go, I was very excited. Me and my family were getting ready to go visit him in the hospital to see how he's doing. We left my house at 4:30 and got to the hospital at 5. I was very excited because I got to see my uncle, I saw him as a dad figure since my dad couldn't spend too much time with me since he had to work most of the time. When we got there, my family went to the front desk to ask for his room and when we were going, they asked for our ages and when I told them mine I wasn't able to go see my uncle in his hospital room. I was taken to this play room where they had many toys while I waited for my family to visit my uncle. I was very disappointed because that was the whole reason I went to the hospital, to see my uncle, I didn't want to play with toys or to play with other kids, that wasn't important to me, my uncle was. I waited and waited for my family to come pick me up and then around 7 they came.

"¿Cómo está mi tío?" I asked.  
"Esta bien hija." is all I got as a response.

The next day I had school all over again. I didn't want to go but I couldn't complain because of how strict my mom was. I went to school and as you can see, I did what a normal student at school would do. Do math, do ELA, get lunch, do history, do science, and get on with a usual basic day at school. At last, it was the end of the school day and I was picked up. When I was picked up, I got home and unpacked everything and changed to regular clothes. The phone rang.



## Jacqueline, cont.

“Speak English or Spanish” said the person who called.

“Spanish” said my aunt.

“Lo siento, pero estoy aquí para informarle que su esposo falleció” said the person on the phone.

I was in the same room as her, in the living room. I saw her, I saw her face expression when she heard what the person said. Her face went cold, shocked and mostly confused, I saw her break down in tears and yell out of anger. I didn't know what to do, I was sitting down at the time and that's when my cousins (her kids) went up to her and asked her what's wrong.

“Tu papa fallecio” is all she said.

I was silent. I could feel the tears rushing down my cheeks, it happened all so quick. It felt like if I lost a part of me that moment, I didn't want to see my family heart broken and crying because I care about them and seeing them cry was painful as well. I didn't know what to do, I never experienced someone's death so it was all I knew. I was feeling emotions that I've never felt before, I was angry, my head was going to explode. I was angry that I wasn't able to see him in his last moments, I was angry that this was happening too soon, I was angry at alcohol, yes alcohol. My uncle developed an addiction to alcohol and it got pretty bad to the point where he couldn't stop drinking. My uncle's livers started failing and it was

because of alcohol, I was mad at myself because at the age of 6-7 I shouldn't have to blame myself for someone's death but I did, I blamed it on me because I couldn't save him, I couldn't get him any help he needed which is why he now long gone.

I kept pushing myself to feel better about what had happened, I knew that I had to be strong as a lion. My uncle's death was sad to me and seeing people I care about cry made me even more sad. During this time, it made me mature so much and especially because I had to grieve all over again since later on the same year my grandma had died.

Time passes by. I grieved for a while and I realized there's going to be people dying whether I like it or not. By when I was 8, I understood more things and matured. I told myself “people I care about are going to die, maybe now, maybe tomorrow, maybe in the next years, and I have to deal with it, yeah it's not going to be easy but as time passes by I'll learn from it, I'll have memories of them, and they will always be in my heart. It's going to hurt but there will be a day where we can reunite and for now I'll keep trying to keep on with my life”. I outgrew myself, I saw myself as independent when I dealt with grieving and maturing because many things happened to me as a child and dealing with grief was one of them. ♥



## A True Hero

It was a normal day in 1st grade like usual. I was doing my work and just sitting there listening to my teacher. I always wear a blue shirt and dark navy blue pants. I usually distance myself from others and just only talk with Mike. He would talk with me about his life and just everything like "I like ..." and "I was playing soccer with my friends and they taught me this cool trick". Mike was a funny guy that liked to be friendly with everyone and I always liked that about him. He always made lots of friends because of this. I wasn't really into making a lot of friends. I felt that Mike was the only friend I needed.

Our class just finished and we were just now heading to recess. When we were in the courtyard we started to talk "Nate, learn to soften up a bit. Sometimes too much of something can be bad for you, you know right?"

"That is not true!" I exclaim "How am I able to reach success if I don't work hard for it!"

"That's not it." Mike said calmly, "You have to be good at all things and not just mental strength."

"I just don't believe that." I tell him. I really just don't believe that.

"Alright then. See ya later." Mike then runs off to play sports with others.

Recess was the usuals, pretty chill. Mike goes off to play while I just stay still and just thought about what my best friend said. Do I have faults that I am not aware of? "That is not true," I tell myself. But I think that I was trying to deny my faults.

Later in the day, it came out of nowhere. Another kid who looked older than me looked my way intensely. "Wanna fight!?"

I tell him calmly, "Why? I didn't do anything to you." But deep down inside of me, I was scared for my life. I never got into a fight before.

The boy looked at me like a predator staring down its prey. He started to get closer towards me.

Step,  
Step,  
Step.

I take a step back, I start to shake and then I start to panic. Silence in the restroom. Just when I thought that I was finished, someone came in, and stood in front of me. I look closely, he had short dark brown hair, was taller than me and looked confident. He turns around and looks at me.

"Don't worry" and turns to face the other kid. He looks scared to see him and he just tells him "If you want to fight, fight me?"

The boy starts to look at the short brown haired boy. Then starts to walk away from the restroom. I look at him leaving the restroom but I see that he put his head down in fear.

"You alright?" He said, giving off a kind smile. "Don't worry, I was here to help you. I will make sure he doesn't bore you again."

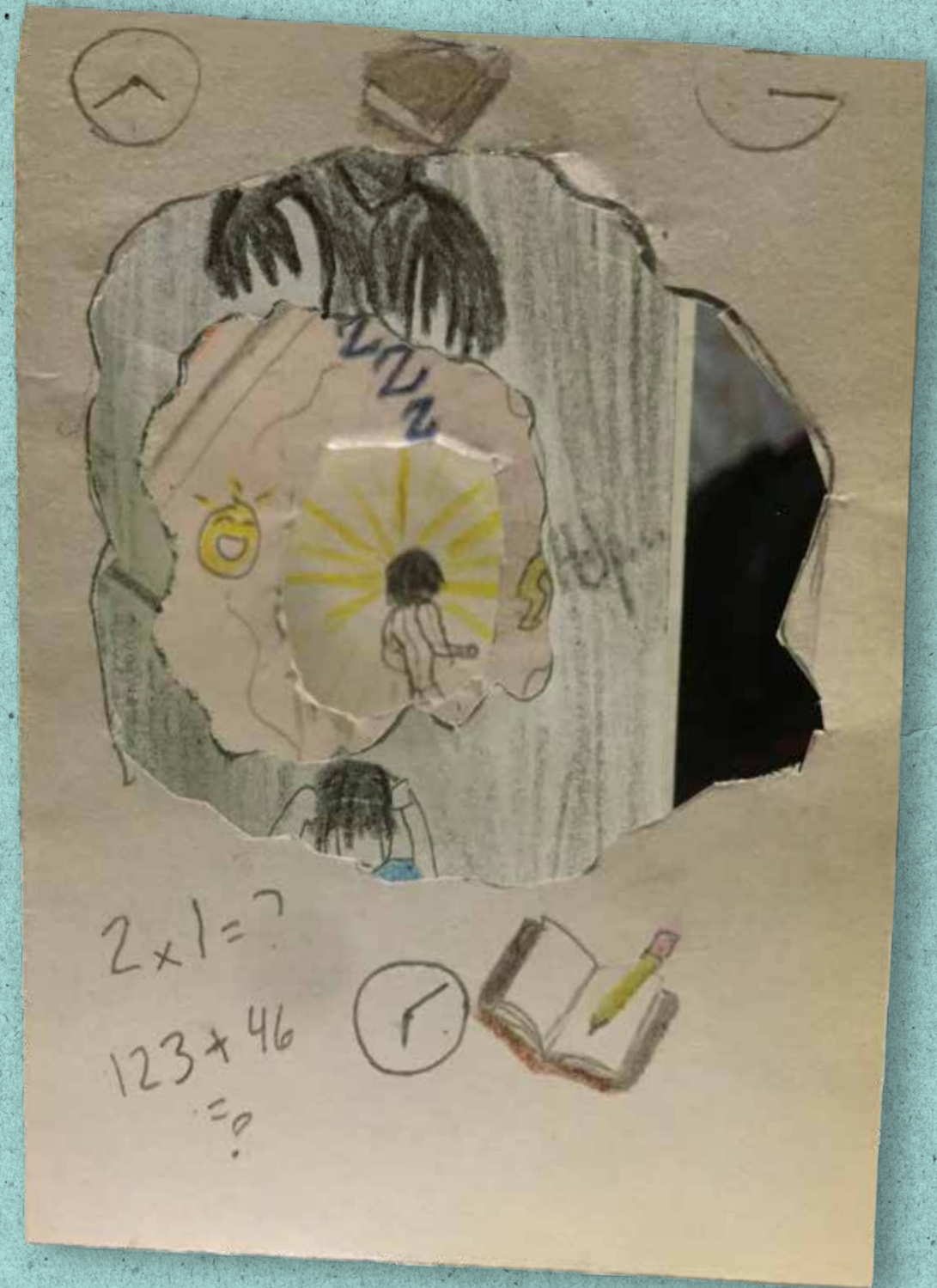
"Thank you" I didn't know what else to say. I started to notice something familiar about him. "What grade are you in?"

"I am in first grade. Why?" He answered curiously.

"You look familiar," I answered.

"How about you?" He says

"I am in --"



## King, continued.

“Wait, let me guess, you are in first grade, too.” He starts saying cheerful.

“Yes. How do you know?” I say.

“Man you are fun! You are in my class, Nate.” He says laughing. It stranges that he knows my name and I don’t. He continues to laugh. “You are always so quiet and lonely, Nate. You mostly hang out with Mike. Anyway, Nice to meet you, I am Frank.”

“Hey, Frank. I am Nate” I told him as I reach out to give him a handshake.

“I know” He then accepts the handshake. We start to head out of the restroom and go back to class.

We were nearby the classroom and I felt the need to ask one final question. “Why did you help me back there although I am not your friend? Why?” I asked facing the ground.

“Is there a reason to not help someone who is in need of it. I saw that you needed help so I stood up for you because you needed it no matter if you are my friend or a stranger. I want to help. The strong people are supposed to look over the weak and not harm them.” He said that with pride.

That was the day that changed my whole way of thinking. I learned that day that the world isn’t all good and that there are problems happening where the strong prey on the weak and in order to help solve this problem. In order to accomplish that I have to learn from my mistakes. I have to listen to the advice that is given to me and work on it. In order to protect my family I have to be strong in all things, not just brain power. My weaknesses will become my strengths. My strengths will become my talent. I will be a hero. A person who helps others and protects them. Just like Frank did for me.

I personally didn’t grow up with much thought as to what I wanted to be. I always admired my parents. They are very hard-working people. But that didn’t make me want to be them because they always told me to strive for something better. I listen to them and I aspire to become smarter because I was told the smarter you are, the better kind of job you will get. But that is what I thought up to this point and nothing further: just get smarter and hope to get a good well-paying job. Then that fateful day occurred where it changed me forever. ♥



## About the Visiting Author

Fred Aceves is the author of *The Closest I've Come*, which was a Kirkus Best Book of 2017, and *The New David Espinoza*, which came out in February of this year.

He was born in New York to a Mexican father, and a Dominican mother, which makes him 100% Mexican, 100% Dominican, and 100% American. He spent most of his youth in Southern California and Tampa, Florida, where he lived in a poor, working class neighborhood like the one described in *The Closest I've Come*.

At the age of 21 he started traveling around the world, living in Chicago, New York, The Czech Republic, France, Argentina, Bolivia, and Mexico. Among other jobs, he has worked as a delivery driver, server, cook, car salesman, freelance editor, and teacher of English as a second language.



## About the Student Authors

The collaborative process of writing our own personal narratives and creating artwork to illustrate them encouraged us to be thoughtful, creative, and purposeful. We made choices ourselves as writers and artists for how to communicate our ideas personally and powerfully. This experience became a process that pushed us out of our comfort zone and reminded us of the importance of vulnerability,

especially when it comes to owning our stories and identities. There is power in telling our stories, but there is even more power when a person feels the confidence and empowerment for bringing their own stories to life. This book celebrates that empowerment and our hard work, dedication, and authenticity.

## About Behind the Book

Behind the Book brings authors and their books into classrooms to build literacy skills and foster a community of lifelong readers and writers. Working with classes from Pre-K through 12th grade, our series of workshops is designed to bring books to life and inspire students to reach their full

potential. Behind the Book is embedded in the class curriculum, nurtures critical thinking, creativity, and self-confidence in New York City public school students. All programs meet the Common Core Learning Standards.

## Common Core Learning Strategies Addressed

**RL.9-10.2** Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

**RL.9-10.3** Analyze how complex characters (e.g. those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

**RL.9-10.5** Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

**W.9-10.3** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

**W.9-10.5** Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting or trying a new approach.

**SL.9-10.1** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

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Behind the Book empowers the next generation of readers and writers by nurturing critical thinking, creativity, and self-confidence in our students.

[behindthebook.org](http://behindthebook.org)

