

Youth Voice of the Central Valley

KNOW the

Winter 08-09

***"I HAVE A STORY
TO TELL"***

issue
#04

Inside:

Love Hurts
My First Real Job
Dear Mom & Dad
The Beat Within

Culture // Religion // Education // Family // Community

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Reader's Note:

In addition to sharing opinions and writing about community/youth issues at The kNOW, we often write about our lives. Whether it's dealing with depression (p. 8), feeling as though we've been left behind in school (p. 10), living with overprotective parents (p. 2), searching for love (p. 18), or coping with the tragic loss of someone close (p. 1), these stories remind us all that life can be so painful that many of the writers this time around feel more comfortable using a pen name.

In this profoundly moving issue, The kNOW writers push themselves to reveal the deep hurt that can be caused by family, school and social circumstances. It takes courage to make yourself vulnerable as a writer, to reveal weakness and pain to readers you do not know, or perhaps to know that those you write about will read these very stories. This courage can only make us stronger as people and more skilled as writers.

Aside from ramping up our writing, this year, we also participated in "Voice Your Vote," a youth voter outreach campaign led by The Rios Company whose goal was to empower youth to get more involved in the voting process. At The kNOW, we held workshops, registered people to vote, and many of the youth got the chance to work in the polls on Election Day. Thanks to all the staff at The Rios Company!

Also, in September, we coordinated a forum, "Lockdown on School Violence," in response to recent school safety issues. We used remote control clickers to survey the fifty youth who attended. Over 76% cited rumors/gossip as the cause of most fights, contrary to the stereotype that gangs are the primary cause. And in addition to rumors/gossip is bullying, which many youth feel can be resolved through more peer counseling services.

I am proud of The kNOW youth for doing such inspiring and innovative work these past few months, and for having the wisdom and maturity to share their stories—with the hope that these stories encourage us to remember, regardless of whether we are teens or adults, that we are not alone in our struggles.

—Mai Der Vang

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Death In 'The Family: Coping With Life's Tragedies

By Peter Chhan

Pain, sorrow, heartbreak, tears, loss; sound familiar? These are emotions you feel when you lose a loved one in a tragedy.

Tragedies can happen in any family or any relationship without warning, such as what happened in my family. Eventually, everyone is going to experience at least one tragic incident in life sooner or later.

I recently lost someone close. He was my brother-in-law's father. He died due to a heart problem that runs in his family. He was a man you could always look up to, a noble man. His name was Liu Tiv, and he lived his life on what he thought was right. He helped immigrants from all over the world get into the United States and obtain their legal papers, even if the families did not have money.

When families did not have money to pay for their papers, he helped pay for them with his own money he earned while working. He was always supportive of us in whatever goals we dreamed of, no matter the situation.

Liu was one of the noblest men in my life, yet he was the first to disappear in my life too.

He had a heart problem that caused chronic failures, and he went into cardiac arrest many times. It is frightening to think of a relative going into a silent death at night with no one to hear or watch over him/her.

His condition worsened gradually as his heart began to get worse. Finally one morning we found him in an upright position on the couch but with his head back and his hands clenched into a fist as if he were in severe pain. His eyes were shut. We knew at that very moment that something was wrong and we rushed him to the hospital.

After two weeks in the hospital we found out that Liu hadn't gone into cardiac arrest but that he had had an aneurysm. He suffered severe brain damage due to high blood pressure from a busted blood vessel in his head. His condition was irreversible and there was nothing we could do. Liu lost all bodily functions, senses, and consciousness permanently. He was in a coma that was impossible to get out of and was kept alive only by life support.

Liu's son Ken was the one left with the decision of whether or not to pull the plug. He couldn't bear the pain of seeing his father like this so he did two days later. We all watched as the blood stopped. It tore me apart inside and I lost it along with the rest of my family. The world had lost a noble and pure soul.

It was hard at first, dealing with the immense emotional pain day after day. At first I kept it to myself but I found it hard because I wanted to share my feelings with someone and ease my pain.

Around me, I had family members and friends to talk to who had gone through the same thing I was going through. I shared my feelings and told them what was going on and they helped me deal with what happened. It eased my pain a great deal. I am very fortunate because not everyone has family members or friends to turn to.

Next, it is important to let your emotions out and speak what is

**The world had
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pure soul.**

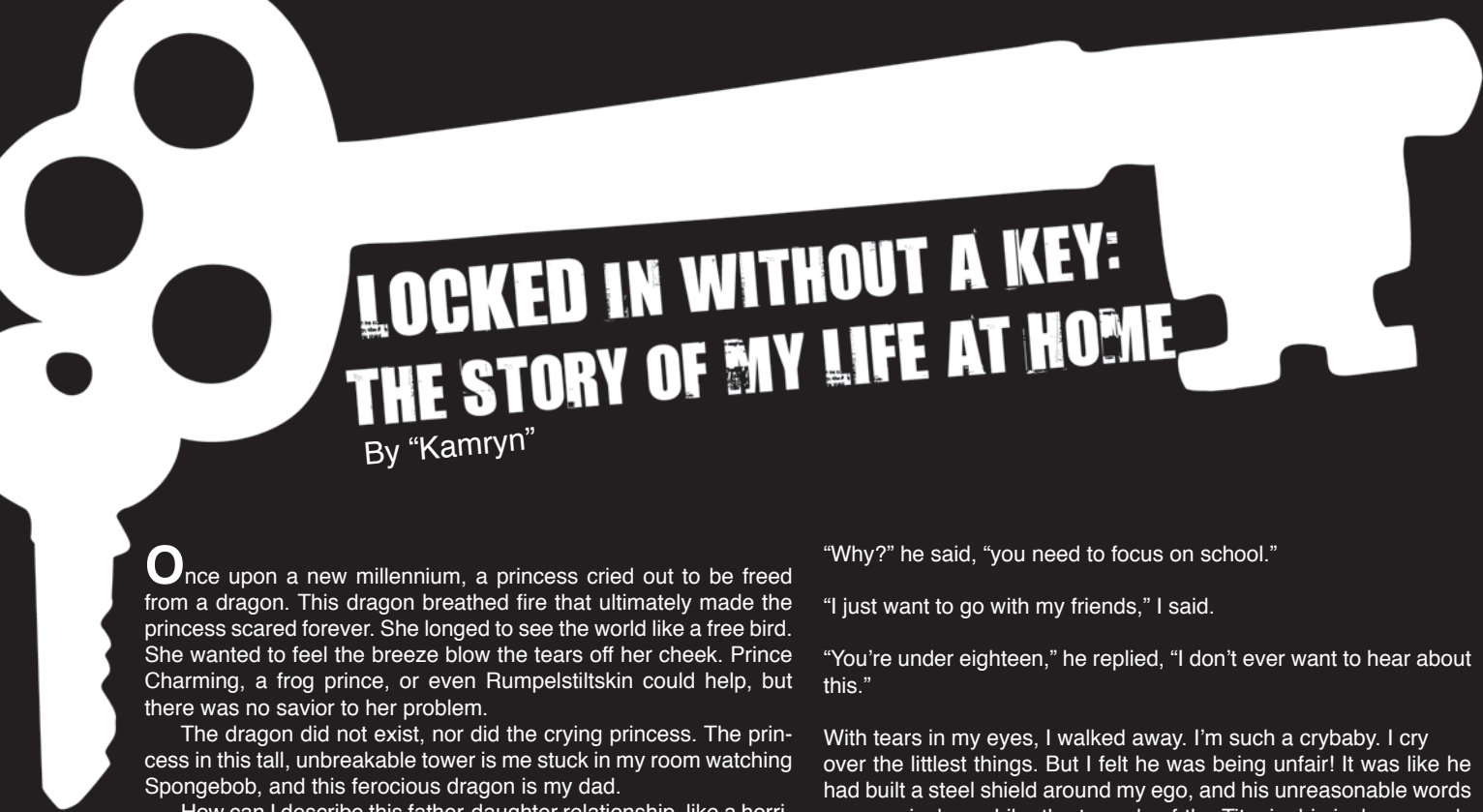
on your mind, which may be the hardest step of the healing process because you have to relive the whole dramatic event all over again. Letting out your emotions is like taking bitter medicine because it is not pleasant at first but it will make your body and thoughts feel cleansed and refreshed. Feedback will also help and comfort your emotions.

Finally, the most simple and yet hardest phase is to let time heal you.

For those who do not have anyone to help ease the pain of losing a loved one, there are always adults in life that will listen such as willing teachers or counselors. There is always a soul out there that will listen.

If you are hurting from losing a loved one, talk to someone. It doesn't matter who it is because as long as you share your feelings, you will ease your pain and begin the healing process of coping from the loss.

I have gone through the experience that everyone has or will go through eventually and I can say for sure that it helps to talk to another person about your pain, and about that person you lost.



LOCKED IN WITHOUT A KEY: THE STORY OF MY LIFE AT HOME

By "Kamryn"

Once upon a new millennium, a princess cried out to be freed from a dragon. This dragon breathed fire that ultimately made the princess scared forever. She longed to see the world like a free bird. She wanted to feel the breeze blow the tears off her cheek. Prince Charming, a frog prince, or even Rumpelstiltskin could help, but there was no savior to her problem.

The dragon did not exist, nor did the crying princess. The princess in this tall, unbreakable tower is me stuck in my room watching Spongebob, and this ferocious dragon is my dad.

How can I describe this father-daughter relationship, like a horrible fairy tale scene? I feel like a prisoner, a person locked in without a key. I am grounded for life and for what—because I am a young girl.

My dad is afraid I will go off and get pregnant, but I am not that kind of girl. I respect my body and I am not so curious to try everything. I want him to understand my desire to be with friends and have fun during my spare time.

I am the youngest in my family. I have three older brothers and one sister. I am automatically my sister's intern without a choice. I must be like her because she's so perfect. She cooks and cleans and has good grades, but I don't have the same interests. I would rather cook for myself and clean my own room. I don't want to have a role where I must clean for everyone, even when I didn't make the mess.

As for my brothers, I think their only job is to take out the trash, and sometimes they don't even have to do it. It's strange; sometimes I wish I were born a boy so I could have more privileges. As for my mother, she's nice, but she has no voice. She repeats, "Ask your dad." But I don't want to ask my dad because I will get a long lecture when the answer is simply NO.

How bad is this situation? From the age I was able to go play with my friends to sixth grade, my curfew was five o' clock. Seventh grade to now, I don't have this curfew anymore, but after school is over, I must go straight home. Earlier in life, I lived in a neighborhood with gangs and kids who caused trouble. My dad tries to protect me by blocking my contact to the outside world. This plan does not work because it just makes my longing to be with my friends grow.

It takes a lot of courage for me to even ask a simple question to my dad. For example, it took me a week to have the courage to ask my dad if I could go to a football game. This bottling excitement exploded during dinner one night.

"Dad, can I go to the football game this Friday?" I asked nervously.

"Why?" he said, "you need to focus on school."

"I just want to go with my friends," I said.

"You're under eighteen," he replied, "I don't ever want to hear about this."

With tears in my eyes, I walked away. I'm such a crybaby. I cry over the littlest things. But I felt he was being unfair! It was like he had built a steel shield around my ego, and his unreasonable words were an iceberg. Like the tragedy of the Titanic, his iceberg-words sunk my ego and self-esteem.

Now don't get me wrong. My dad isn't a horrible man. He might

be a strict and close-minded person but he does cook for the family sometimes. He has provided my family and I with shelter and he helps me with my homework. I look up to him because he has achieved a lot. He graduated from college and is now a chemist.

I know he wants what is best for me when all he mentions is school. He's strict because he doesn't want me to screw up. He wants me to survive this harsh reality. But he doesn't know that I am strong and I am not vulnerable to everything in society. I know I would never be too strict with my

own kids in the future.

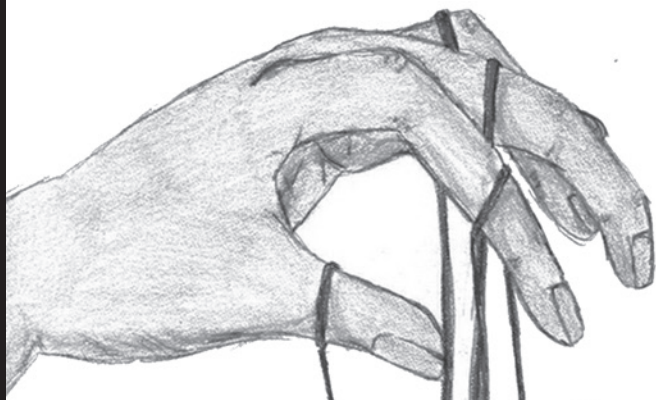
My friends believe my dad is unfair too. All I want is to spend time with my friends. I feel horrible when they ask me to go their birthday party or hang out because I always answer with "I'm not sure, I don't think my dad will let me."

My friends are special to me. I know I can always go to them when I am sad or when life gets too complicated. I have even made them my "primary" family. But I feel like if I don't get to be with them as much when they're together, I might lose them.

Trust is nowhere to be found in my family. I somewhat feel that there's never going to be trust with my dad. I do understand his way of caring. He was brought up this way and tradition is tradition. Who am I to bring my modern opinions to his world? Maybe I should just sneak out, but no, I won't do that because breaking his rules is proving that "I'm becoming a delinquent."

My advice to those who have to deal with strict parents is to let them hear your opinions from time to time but don't complain too much. Be confident, stay positive, and remember to appreciate the privileges they let you have. Life is complicated as it is so don't let the negativity keep you down.

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Let Me Live!

A Letter To My Parents



Dear Mom and Dad,

I understand you both want what's best for me, but sometimes I feel like you are holding me back. I'm 16 now, but sometimes you treat me as if I'm still 6. Sometimes it feels like the biggest barrier in life, that I face, is you both. I understand you are only guiding me but can't I make my own mistakes sometimes?

I want to be able to go out with my friends every now and then. I want to be able to have a boyfriend. I want to be able to have a job. I want to be able to drive already! Most importantly, I just want to be able to experience what life has to offer, and make decisions for myself.

One of the decisions I want to make for myself is to choose the college I go to. You want me to grow up to be someone someday, but you won't even let me choose my own college. I am working hard in high school right now so I can go to a University of California school, but the way you treat me now, I think I'll have to stay home and go to Fresno State.

You don't understand all the hard work I have been putting into my education to even be able to qualify for a UC. I'm not saying that Fresno State is bad, but why can't I go to a UC? Why does it matter if I go to a college in Fresno, or in a different city? At least I'm going to college, right?

How can I spread my wings and grow up, with you both constantly making my decisions for me, decisions that affect my life in a huge way? Decisions, like deciding that I wasn't allowed to play sports anymore or do the extracurricular activities I love.

It hurts me when you judge me and compare me to your friends' kids. So what if their kids are straight "A" students and never go out

with their friends, or never complain about going out? So what if their kids are all skinny and in shape?

I still remember the mornings when you both would say I was getting fat, or that I should stop doing extracurricular activities or stop going to school events because you believed I was getting bad grades. I remember those moments clearly because they happened so many times.

Mom always starts off by saying, "You're getting fat, stay away from all the sweets and chips," or she'll say, "Who will want to marry you in the future when you're fat?" Then I'll reply, "Well I don't care Mom, maybe I want to be fat, it's my body and if no one likes it, then so be it."

It's as if we just live together, but you're here to control my life, like I'm a puppet.

Sometimes Dad will say, "You know that football game you want to go to Friday night, I don't think you should go because you must be failing a class or not doing your homework." Or he'll say, "If you go out or disobey me, I won't pay for your drivers training."

You may think I am failing my classes, but I am actually doing very well in all of my classes. So it isn't fair that you say I can't do this or that simply because you think I'm getting bad grades.

I remember sitting at the table, listening to you both ramble about what I'm doing wrong or what you think I'm doing wrong, when I really haven't done anything. I remember walking out the front door, and slamming it so loud that even the neighbors could hear. Can I just have a "Good Morning," instead of "You can't do this, your friends are bad, you can't do that, if you do this I won't pay for your drivers training, if you keep eating that, then you'll be fat!?"

It bugged me when you judged my friend simply because of some rumors you heard about her. Sure, she's made a couple of mistakes, everyone has, it happens. To you, everyone is a bad influence.

Why can't you realize that I'm old enough to know who is and isn't a bad influence? Just because my friends or peers have made bad choices and mistakes doesn't mean I'll make the same choices or mistakes. I choose to learn from my mistakes and the mistakes of others around me. I'm sure I'm capable of at least that. You should trust me enough to know that. I'm not saying you have to trust my friends, but at least trust me.

It feels like you both don't take time to notice what is truly hurting or bothering me. You don't even know what has been going on in my life, or how I feel about things, my opinions. You know very little about me. It's as if we just live together, but you're here to control my life, like I'm a puppet.

Sometimes I feel like you don't trust me enough to let me live. Other times, I feel like you both constantly bring me down so that you can control my life. Then when you bring me down, you don't even know how it makes me feel. I never thought my own parents could hurt me so much, and make me so sad.

How can you expect so much from me but when I am working toward achieving it, you bring me down? Everything I do today is what I'm doing to try and live up to your expectations. I'm trying my best in school, trying to keep my grades up, trying to get a steady job, trying to make you proud.

I am just trying my best...

**Your Daughter,
"AJ"**

Hmong Shamanism, A Dying Craft

By Dasen Thao // Artwork by Boonma Yang

Imagine having the ability to communicate with spirits, both good and evil. It may seem incredible and unreasonable to believe, but according to many Hmong people who practice shamanism, shamans have the power to communicate with spirits of the dead.

Who exactly chooses the next shaman? Through many generations, it has been that the ancestors of the family line choose the shaman. They find a strong and faithful living soul to depend on to carry out the tradition.

How do they know they have been chosen? In some cases, the one who has been chosen gets severely sick. The sickness can only be cured if the person answers the call of becoming the next shaman. The chosen one then learns from another shaman, and it can take up to three years for that person to learn how to say the chants, do the rituals, and build the altars. Today, there are many shamans in the Hmong community.

Shaman rituals can vary depending on the situation, for example, it can be a ritual to heal someone from a sickness, or it can be a ritual to communicate with a dead loved one. It can also be ritual to bring good luck, or a ritual to hurt someone who has offended you.

I remember one time it was early in the morning when I heard my mom hollering down the hallway for my brother and I to wake up. It was the day that my dad, a shaman himself, would do a ceremony for my sick uncle. I went with my parents and two older brothers to my uncle's house that morning. As soon as we got there, we all went to work.

My dad went into the living room and built a shrine where he would do the ceremony. My mom went into the kitchen with the other women and helped them wash vegetables for the ritual meal. My brothers and I went into the garage to wait for the pig to arrive so we could start chopping it up. The pig would be used in the ceremony, and then we would eat the pig as part of the meal.

Soon, I heard a loud "gong". It startled me as my father began banging a metal drum with a stick that had a cloth covering one end. Then from a distance, I heard him chanting.

One important part of the shrine he uses as a shaman is the long bench symbolizing a horse that will fly him into the spirit world. There were times in the ceremony where he would sit on the bench, or stand on top of the bench, and even jump while standing on top. His face was covered with a cloth to show he was in a spiritual trance. To make sure he was safe, there were people watching him as he jumped from here to there and up and down from the bench. The trance can last an hour or can even take up the whole day. It



just depends on the situation that the shaman is trying to fix.

These simple tasks are important. If anything goes wrong, it can hurt the shaman or the spirits he summons. My uncle had been sick for the past few weeks. When I went into the living room, I could see him sitting on the bench with a rope tied around him connecting him to the dead pig on the floor.

My father walked around the pig and my uncle, then stopped for a few seconds and then he spit water toward them. Although it seems appalling that he is spitting, I think it actually means he is cleansing my uncle from his sickness. After my father finished the ritual, the guys and I went to work chopping the pig into pieces to be used in the meal for everyone to enjoy.

By the end of the ceremony, all the men and sons from my uncle's side kneeled down several times in appreciation for my father's time and energy. The result of my uncle's sickness was revealed through the ceremony. The reason he became sick was because it had been a long time since he had paid homage (through offerings of food and money) to his deceased father, and he needed to do that soon to end his sickness.

Every year, many Hmong families perform a ritual celebration to bring in the New Year and drive out evil spirits. This usually happens toward the end of the year, like in November or December.

It was in late November when my dad decided it was time for our family to have our annual ritual. Early the next morning, we all got up as a family and went straight to work. My mother and sisters began washing and cutting vegetables and fruits. My brothers and I greeted and conversed with relatives as they arrived.

My father started the ritual. He stood at the front door of our house, with the door open, looking out into the neighborhood, holding the split horn of a cow. Next to him on a chair was a bowl of uncooked rice, which had three eggs and some incense placed inside. There were two live chickens placed at his feet.

He wore a cloth over his head and began to chant by the door.

First he began with a weird sound like a motorboat starting up. Then he started to recite a chant I could not comprehend. Since I have eleven siblings, my father had to mention all of our names in his chant so he could bless us all for the New Year.

Next, he took the split horns and threw them onto the ground, making sure they landed with the same sides facing up. If they did not land the same side facing up, he would have to keep throwing them until they matched. It took him a couple of tries before they finally matched.

After my father finished the ritual, eleven eggs were boiled and consumed by each of us kids, to bring luck and a good year ahead.

In the kitchen, the women and girls were busy making all sorts of food, like egg rolls, papaya salad, rice, and chicken. When the food was done, everyone ate and we all enjoyed the food as a large family.

There are still many things about shamanism that I have yet to learn,

for example, what happens to the shaman when he goes into the trance? What do the chants mean? How can a person be jumping up and down from a bench with a cloth over his face for a few hours or a day? I always feel fascinated when I see a shaman perform a ceremony because I often wonder where his force and energy come from.

With the younger generation, it feels like shamanism will not be kept alive. Some people who go to church do not practice shamanism anymore, others think it is too much work, while some don't care. I feel like it is a dying craft. I can't imagine this ritual being gone from this world because I will feel like part of my history is gone. This is the ritual my ancestors once practiced, and if the future generations do not continue it, then who will?

I can't imagine this ritual being gone from this world because I will feel like part of my history is gone.

BROKEN HMONG HISTORY: FINDING MY CULTURE

By Angelina Thao // Artwork by Boonma Yang



When I was young, my mom used to tell me all kinds of folktales, stories about Hmong people, and about what she went through living in Laos.

One night, I sat next to my mom and asked her about these stories. Many of these stories revealed bits and pieces about my Hmong history. This was one of the ways I learned about my history. But I always wondered if these stories were true.

I am 16 years old and I have a huge

family. I am Hmong and American and I was born in the U.S. In my family my dad was the only one who knew a lot about Hmong culture. It is sad because I didn't ask him enough questions, and he didn't tell me enough to make me understand the Hmong culture before he passed away three years ago.

Sometimes being a Hmong-American can be frustrating because it's hard for me to balance these two different cultures when I am still learning about them. My parents are both refugees and my dad was the only one with an education. He actually finished high school and got his diploma.

I wish I knew more about where Hmong people originated, how we survived in Laos, and more about our traditions. It makes me feel lost not knowing these things about my culture.

To tell you the truth, there were times I wished I weren't Hmong because I felt as if I didn't belong anywhere in the world since Hmong people have no country. But then I came to accept my Hmong heritage because I knew I couldn't be any other kind. At that point I decided to learn more about my history.

I started by asking my mom lots of questions. I asked her who the Hmong people are and she replied, "Hmong people are people who lived in the mountains of Laos."

Then she told me how she used to farm back in Laos, having to cut down trees, cut weeds, and burn them in order to farm. I think this is called "slash and burn" farming. And as my mom described how the smoke rose from the pile of burning weeds and logs, I got even more curious and at the same time confused!

There were all these questions in my head, like how did they develop a strategy like that? Who taught them? What did they do before farming? How did they know what crop to grow? What was their main dish or crop? And so many more questions.

So then I asked her next, where did Hmong people come from? Her answer was "From what I know your grandparents have been living in Laos ever since they were little so that's probably where we're from."

But then I asked her again because I wasn't satisfied with the answer. My mom then reminded me about the story her parents told her when she was younger. It was the story of when Hmong people lived in China, and there was never any peace between the two groups, mostly just war. The Chinese did not want Hmong people in Chi-

na, so finally Hmong people left China and went down to Laos.

Hearing this story this made me sad. My mom and I both didn't know why the Hmong people were treated with disrespect, which forced them to leave. Knowing this history made me feel unwanted by other cultures.

I asked my mom why the Hmong people didn't have their own country, land or state. She said she didn't know so I went and asked my dad. He answered, "I'm not sure, but the elders once told us a story about a great Hmong king who was really powerful."

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anywhere**

I asked him what happened to this great king. He answered "Well, the Chinese came to live with us on our land and they wanted to take over, but we were so strong they couldn't beat us. At the end, they gave our king a beautiful Chinese lady to be his wife, saying that she was their gift to apologize, but when our king went to lay with his Chinese wife, she assassinated him. The Chinese people were then able to take over and chase the Hmong people out."

I was amazed by this story because I learned that Hmong people used to be a monarchy in China. I did a research report about where Hmong people came from, and there were so many theories that I was really confused. I didn't know what to believe in because all of the theories made the other one untrue. So the origin of the Hmong people is a mystery, although a lot of people will argue that we came from China.

Even though most of our history is unknown, most people DO know that we were recruited by the Americans to fight in the Secret War during the Vietnam War. And they also know that many Hmong people came to this country as refugees.

It is important for everyone to know about his/her own culture. Not knowing about your culture will make it difficult to pass it on to the next generation.

I know learning more about my culture will help me find myself, and allow me to be more confident as a person. Although I know some stuff about my culture, I am still learning, and I feel proud educating others about who I am.

Enlightened Heart: Searching For God, Finding Myself

By Marcus Vega

My search throughout my life to understand religion resulted in my confusion, but it also helped me find my faith.

When I was younger, I was Catholic. But as I grew up, I started to see that a lot of what Catholics practiced, such as believing in saints and the Virgin Mary, did not sit well with what I felt. I realized my life would be easier if I accepted I wasn't a true Catholic, and that I had yet to find where I belonged, spiritually.

One day when I was walking through downtown Fresno, I was struck by a mosque. It was like fate pulled me into the mosque. It was empty inside except for the Imam, the person who leads prayer. It was at that time that I switched from Catholicism to Islam. After I switched, I embarked on a spiritual quest to become one with the Rashidun, which is Arabic for the rightly guided ones.

My quest to find spirituality was near fulfillment. I truly felt I was on a blessed path into the light. This became stronger when I started to immerse myself in the Five Pillars of Islam, which are the duties of each Muslim. For example, one pillar, the Salat, talks about engaging in prayer five times a day, while another pillar, the Shahadah talks about professing your faith in Islam.

But then I found a verse in the Quran that stated for Muslims to smite all unbelievers at the necks, which thrust me into further confusion. The verse made me think more about Islam. It made it seem like Jews and Christians are wrong in their teachings because Muslims don't believe in Jesus or the Trinity. Also, Muslims don't believe in the Immaculate Conception, which Catholics believe is when Mary conceived the child Jesus.

Maybe I saw the verse different from others, but whatever the case, it didn't sit well with my beliefs. So I started my spiritual journey all over again. This was when I turned to Christianity after meeting someone who told me more about the Christian faith. On Easter Sunday of this year, I was baptized.

I submerged myself into Christianity after learning about Jesus Christ. I immersed myself in a new spiritual quest.

There were times though when my Christian faith turned off, such as when I went to church and people would claim to be healers. They would fall to the floor and proclaim that the "Holy Ghost" was in them. They would speak in tongues.

I remember one time when I went to church I saw people thrashing on the floor, speaking in tongues, not noticing other people around them. One woman looked up startled at everyone else. This idea drowned out what I wanted from a faith. I wanted to spend time studying God while the church engaged in song and dance.

Yet I still value my Christian faith. The story of Job has really touched my life. Job was a prosperous man who had everything good in his life, a family, material possessions, and friends. But one day God decided to test him and take everything away. Even so Job still did not curse God despite the suffering that God put him through. All he did

was curse his birth.

I feel my life is a modern re-telling of Job. Unlike Job though, my possessions were not great, but I learned to be grateful for what I had. My losses began when I was young. My father walked away from my life or he was either locked up, I don't know. My mother vanished after leaving me into the care of my grandmother, who then became my mother and father. My grandmother taught me about life and gave me knowledge.

After losing her two years ago, I was hurt and lost. I became infatuated with drugs and a desire to get money. I started to rob and steal from people in the dark hours of the morning. I felt myself slipping while the people around me watched.

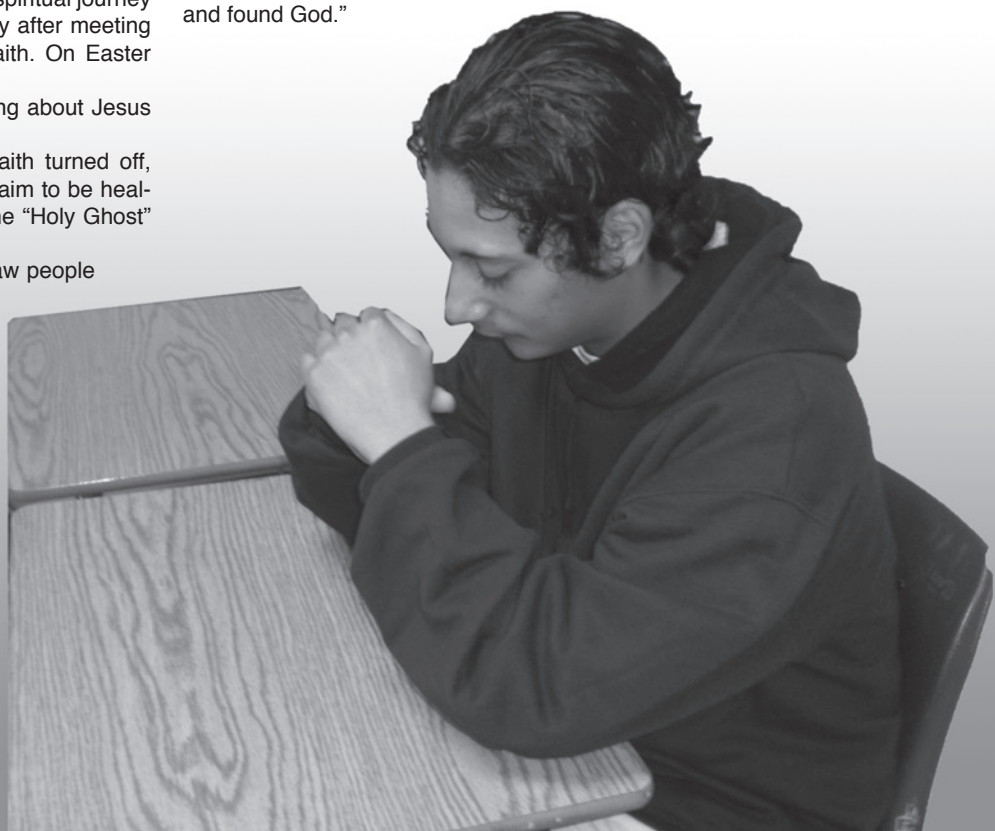
Then I came upon a verse in the Bible. The verse was from Corinthians, and it said that if I have knowledge and a faith that can move mountains, but I do not have love, then I have nothing. It taught me that love is patient and kind. It taught me that love protects, and it always trusts, hopes, and perseveres. It taught me to overcome my grandmother's death with love and patience. After being baptized, I turned away from my life of foolishness.

One of my favorite quotes is that "If words come from the heart, they will enter the heart; but if they come from the tongue, they will not pass beyond the ears." To me, this means that whatever comes from the heart is the truth.

I believe God makes everything happen for a reason. I may have jumped from one religion to another, but my

quest to find my spiritual place has led me closer to understanding what God wants for me, and that is to gain knowledge to teach others along with me. For me, as in this proverb, "I searched for God and found only myself. I searched for myself and found God."

**I had yet to find
where I belonged,
spiritually.**





Depression, My Own Painful Story

By Jaleesa Vickers

Imagine you're in the deepest, darkest pit on earth. How deep do you think it goes? It's cold and you're alone, and you're not sure what to do. You want to escape but you don't know how. You cry, but no one hears. You want to do something but you can't find strength to compose yourself.

Sound scary? Sound unreal? I'm talking about depression, the reality of many people around us.

We've all heard about it, and most of us have been through it. Everyone gets down every now and then, but to me, that's not depression, it's a bad day. When you're depressed, it sticks with you for weeks, months, even years.

If you or someone else has depression, it may not be apparent at first. Someone may not be obvious with their emotions and depression can be difficult to detect. It is a very serious condition and should not be taken lightly.

I have my own painful ties to depression. I can remember it like yesterday, just getting up to go to school was a struggle. I would think, "What's the point? No one there cares about me."

My freshman year was the hardest. I had no friends. I would sit around, wanting to approach someone, but I would put myself down by saying, "No one is going to want to talk to a sad girl, I'll just bring them down too."

I always knew that being so negative wasn't going to get me anywhere. For some reason, I kept thinking the same things over and over anyway.

Time passed, and I still felt the same. I tried doing things I loved, but none of it seemed to help anymore. I lost interest in everything and everyone around me. I joined the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) Club at my school to make some friends. It worked, and I started to feel better about who I was.

As soon as my situation was getting better, a group of girls began to harass me. They called me names, threatened me, and followed me around. My veil of depression, the one I had been trying so hard to fight, came back thicker than ever. I was losing myself. I felt like giving up. I felt so bad I wanted to die.

Depression can be caused by a vast number of things including the death of a loved one, low self-esteem, trouble at home and school, or getting fired, just to name a few. The causes can be environmental or biological (chemical imbalances in the brain).

For me, depression was brought on by what was going on around me. I remember being a very young child and being depressed. Of course I didn't know what to call it then, and all I remembered was feeling really "sad".

I hated how I looked—I was so much taller, heavier, and darker than the other kids. I was about five or so at the time. I was a nice girl, but I couldn't understand why the other kids were so afraid of

me. I realized how I looked compared to them and I wished how I could be the same as them. I would feel so sad everyday, beating myself up for something I knew I couldn't change. Kids would even make fun of me because of how sad I looked! This went on for eleven years.

To this day, I continue to coexist with depression. Ever since I graduated from high school, my circle of friends has diminished and I feel like everyone is getting farther from me.

I have no job and my family is having financial problems. I can't even afford to go school. On top of that, I've been working passed a really bad break up, having to rebuild myself piece by piece.

Sometimes I feel like quitting—like giving up and letting all my efforts go down the drain. But I'm lucky enough to have something inside of me pushing me to keep going.

Nowadays, I am starting to see other youth go through the same scenario. Of course many youth will become depressed about school and home life, but what about the other issues that are going on in our community? Our world?

The world is changing fast and a lot of adults may not understand all of our struggles. We have to worry about the cost of higher education, gas prices, jobs, and the

war in Iraq. Our generation has to be the one to grow up and solve all these problems and the ones to come. These issues put pressure on us to succeed and do well, but sadly, not all of us make it out in the real world. We sometimes lose faith in ourselves, in turn, becoming depressed.

I take comfort in knowing I am not the only person around with a story of depression. Unfortunately because of it, some people don't get to share their story. I've been to the end and back, but so many others don't get the satisfaction.

I have attempted suicide. I tried to hang myself, but it didn't work. I've even cut myself countless times, all due to my self-loathing and self-hatred. I never found the courage to go all the way. Luckily, I'm here today, telling youth and adults alike that they too can take steps to overcome depression.

It may seem like a difficult mission, but I would like to call for a stand against depression. It would be unrealistic for people to be happy all the time, but I know that we as youth can help improve this problem. Not just in our own lives, but in others' as well.

We should help people understand how serious of a problem it is, and the potential risks involved if depression strengthens its grasp on youth. People should be educated on a number of mental health topics, especially on depression.

My story of battling depression is just one among millions. Too many youth are plagued by this condition. Let's come together and find a way to stop it.

You want to escape but you don't know how. You cry, but no one hears.

LOOKING IN

Overcoming My Life As An Outcast

By "Marie"



What does the word outcast mean? Have you ever felt or been treated like an outcast? For those who don't know what it means, the dictionary defines it as someone who is cast out, rejected, or an exile driven from his home or country.

Someone once asked me this very same question, have I ever felt or been treated like an outcast? At that time, I didn't understand or know what that person meant so I said I couldn't answer the question right then. Now I can answer it because I know what the word means and yes, I have been treated and felt like an outcast.

I am the oldest out of six kids and I am mixed half Black and half White. I am the only mixed child in my family. All of my half siblings are white. About twenty years ago, my mom was raped by a Black man and that's how I came along.

The first time I was treated like an outcast was right inside my own family. One night, one of my sisters did something that made me mad, so then we started arguing. Then she called me the "N" word. I looked at her and cried, and I then went to tell our parents. They told her that the word she said was wrong to say to anyone, especially to someone in your family. A couple of months later my sisters and I got into another huge argument and they called me the "N" word again. They told me I didn't belong in the family because I'm Black.

At first I was hurt. Then my uncle told me the story of how my mom had been raped by the Black man. The next day I asked my mom if my uncle was right about everything and she confirmed what he said. She told me that I have a different dad from my other siblings while they all had the same dad. Every time my sisters and

brothers call me the "N" word or tell me I don't belong because I'm Black, it makes me feel like an outcast.

The second time I felt like an outcast was when I was in the sixth grade. It started out as a beautiful Monday morning and I was excited because it was my first day at a new school. When I got to school, some kids started making fun of me and calling me the "N" word. I didn't know what the word meant at the time so I tried to ignore it and go on with my day.

They told me I didn't belong in the family because I'm Black.

The next day, it got worse because now everyone (I mean the kids) were calling me the "N" word and teasing me because I was the only dark kid. Every time I went to tell a teacher, the teachers would either say I was misinterpreting what was being said or to just ignore them because they're just being kids.

Then I went to tell the principal and he told me that the kids were calling me the "N" word and making fun of me because the school used to be an all White school. It hurt to hear that because he was supposed to be supportive of my situation, and he was not.

After this incident we moved to another city and I transferred schools. One day when we got home from school, my mom and stepdad said they were going to rent a movie for us to watch and so they left. I just finished cooking dinner when they got home. I dished everyone a plate then we went into the family room to eat and watch the movie.

The movie was called American History X. It was about racism and about the importance of treating everyone equally. My parents wanted to show my siblings that being racist and saying the "N" word wasn't right, and that we should never say it to anyone.

The third time I felt like an outcast was in the last couple of months. My brothers for the first time called me the "N" word along with some other racial names. I thought we were through with these racist comments but I guess not. My one brother told me that at least his dad didn't rape my mom and that made want to cry.

I think about the way I was brought into this world, about my bloodline, and it makes me feel sad. But then I remember all of the positive things about my life. I think about my family and all my friends from The kNOw who have encouraged me to succeed in life, to never give up, and to go for my dreams. People can make you feel or treat you like an outcast, whether it's your friends, kids at school, especially going to a new school for the first time, or your own family members.

I have learned that you have to ignore what people say because they are just trying to make you feel bad and trying to make themselves feel better about who they are. We all need to realize that God made us all different in our own special ways, and that's what makes us unique in our own way.

I know it hurts when someone you know makes you feel like an outcast, but keep your head up and don't let them get the best of you. No one is an outcast. Everyone belongs somewhere.

Left Behind:

my struggle with family and school

By “Nana”

Second period, Science Research. My counselor calls me out of class to talk to me about my credits. I walk to her office, nervously, thinking about how the meeting will go.

I knock on her office door, hoping she's not there. The door opens. I see my counselor, a tall, skinny, white lady with long hair and green eyes. I sit down as she pulls out my folder.

I stare at the ground. From the corner of my eye, I see the shocked reaction on her face as she looks at my grades.

“Oh my god,” I hear her say. “What’s going on?”

I look up at her with a serious expression on my face.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I finally answer.

“Well you better start because if you keep this up, you’re not going to graduate!” she says. “What’s your goal for the rest of the school year?”

“To hopefully graduate and go to college,” I say.

“Why hopefully?” she asks.

“Well you said I’m not going to graduate!”

“No I didn’t. Don’t put words in my mouth,” she says.

“Yes you did, you told me I’m not going to graduate if I keep doing what I’m doing now,” I reply.

“If you keep it up, but you’re not going to keep it up, right?” she says.

“I don’t know!” I answer, and look away. There was a moment of silence.

“I don’t feel like there is a reason to try if all I hear is that I’m not going to make it in life,” I finally say.

“You know what? I’m going to set your goal. From now on, you’re going to go to your classes, talk to your teachers and ask if there is anything you can do to raise up your grades,” she says.

“Ya, okay,” I answer.

“Go back to your class. I’m not going to put up with your attitude. You obviously don’t care about your future,” she says, putting my folder away.

I look at her like, what the french toast?!

“I do care!” I exclaim.

“It doesn’t look like it.”

“I do care. It just doesn’t look like it because I set my hopes up and somehow someone puts them down and tells me I’m worthless,” I yell.

Then she says, “I understand what you’re going through.”

“No! No you don’t. Don’t act like you know what I’m going through because you have no idea,” I say to her. “I come from a family that is nothing like yours. You might have had trouble in school or have had family problems but I bet it’s nothing compared to what I’m going through.”

I stand up and start walking to the door.

“I’m going to graduate, if I have to take night school and adult school,” I say, “I’m going to get my diploma somehow.” I open the door to leave and then head back to class.

Later that day, I go home to people yelling. Walking through the front door, I find my brother arguing with my mom. I walk into the hallway towards my room, trying to ignore the yelling.

As I pull out my key to open my door, my mom yells at me. I open my door and throw my things on my bed.

“I’m calling you!” I hear her yell.

“What?” I shout back.

“Come here!” She says in an angry tone.

I walk out of my bedroom into the living room to find my mom sitting at the dining room table.

“Mande?” I say to her in Spanish.

“What happened at school today?” she asks.

“Nothing, why?” I answer her, forgetting the incident with my counselor.

“I got a call from your counselor saying you went off on her,” my mom replies.

“Ya I did because she told me I wasn’t going to graduate,” I say.

“Look at your grades!” She throws me an envelope with my grades inside.

“I know what my grades are and I’m working to get them up.”

“Are you doing drugs?” She asks, getting up to go into the kitchen and fix something for my dad to eat.

"No what makes you ask that?" I answer, trying to keep my cool.

"Just asking."

"Oh...okay?" I say as I go to the refrigerator and look inside.

Out of nowhere I feel a force on my hand. The refrigerator door closes as it hits me. I look up to see my mom standing there looking at me.

"What was that for?" I ask.

"You're going to end up like your stupid brothers, huh?" she says after a moment of silence.

"No, how many times do I have to tell you. I'm going to be better than them," I say, trying to keep my tone normal.

"You're not going to graduate," she replies.

"Man! I'm tired of hearing all this BS from you and every one else. No one has any hope in me. If you don't believe me then that's all on you ma'!" I say back.

"I told you I'm going to graduate if it takes me a while but I'm going to get that diploma and go to college. I'm going to get a job and take care of you and dad when you guys get old. No matter what you say I'm going to keep trying. All your yelling is causing me pain. I love you and always will but I'm never going to forget this. Yes mom, I'm doing drugs! Is that what you want to hear??? 'Cause I'll lie if it makes you feel better, I'll lie so you can be right even though you're not."

She looks at me as if I am a stranger.

"I don't want to keep arguing with you," I continue, "I'm gonna do my thing. If you want to encourage me then you are more than welcome to, and I hope you do. But I'm not going to keep hearing this from you. Sorry!"

I give her a kiss on the cheek and walk back to my bedroom. I have a horrible feeling in my heart for raising my voice to my mother for the first time.

I fake a smile to the world. I act like nothing is wrong. Seems like I don't care on the outside but inside something is eating me alive. I want to be someone and prove everyone wrong. But all the put-downs that come my way make me want to fall to the ground and cry.

I've been through a lot these past few months. Senior bills, credits I need to graduate, drama at home, feeling discouraged.

My dad's been looking at me differently. My mom keeps telling me I am worthless. Even my brother thinks I'm nothing. The only thing I hear from him is "Can I borrow some money?" My friends are too wrapped up in their own problems.

I see school as a way to escape unhappiness with my family, but all I hear in my head at school is failure. I ask my teachers for help but they seem to not care.

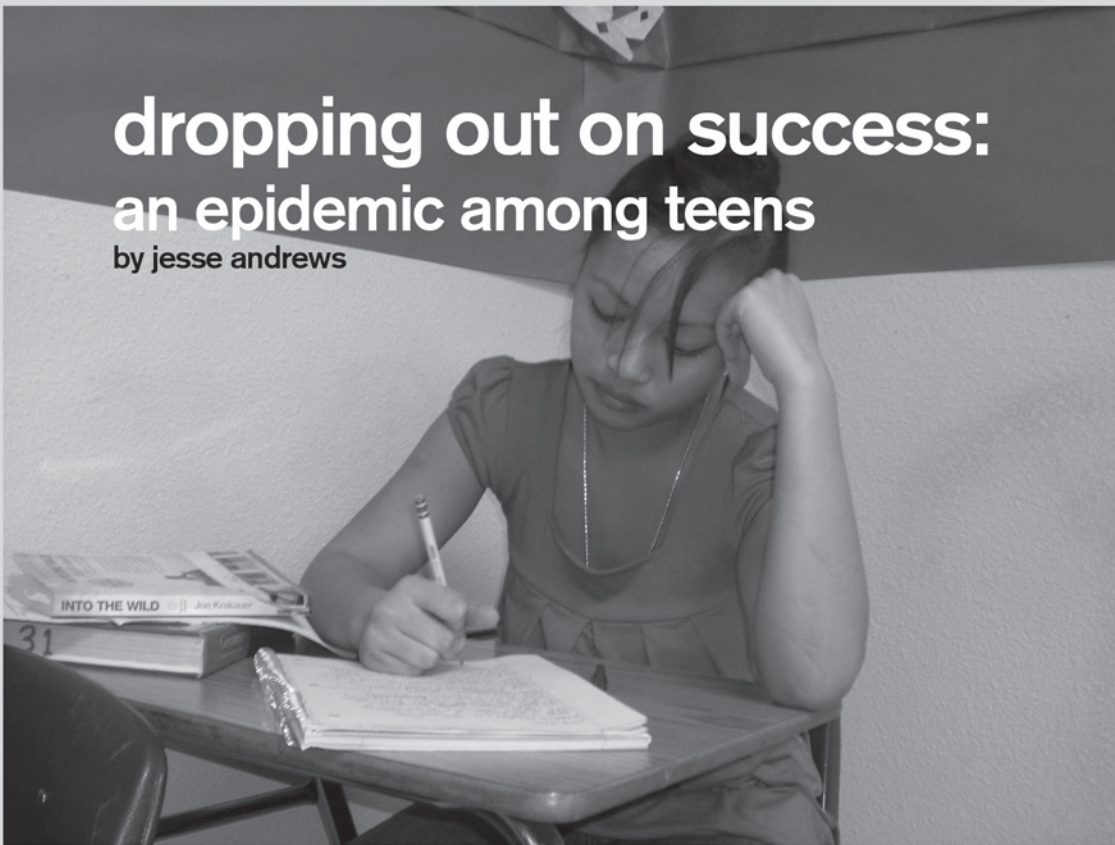
Each day passes and my problems grow stronger. I lose myself and start bad habits. I lag in school, with 108 absences, F's in mostly all my classes. No point of trying. No encouragement from anyone.

"No child left behind." So much for that! I am a senior and I am supposed to know what I am doing, but where is the encouragement to succeed?



dropping out on success: an epidemic among teens

by jesse andrews



The other day, I saw an old friend at school waiting patiently for the bell to ring for lunch. I asked her how she was doing and what she was up to. She said she was returning her book to her math class. It was November, and she was returning her book because she had dropped out during the first week of school in August.

Unfortunately this has become common for me to see at my high school. I wonder what happens to many students that causes them to give up or lose hope in their education.

As a young child, my mind roamed with ideas for what I wanted in my future. I wanted to be like Indiana Jones. I wanted to be a police officer. I wanted to be a doctor. I still want to be a doctor.

In California, the drop out rate is close to 25%, and most of the kids dropping out are people of color. Imagine that these kids dropping out could be our future doctors and lawyers. I am African American, and I wouldn't dare drop out of school.

I've realized that the world out there is tough and that I am going to need an education to compete and make my dream of becoming a doctor happen.

I have a younger brother in elementary school, and there was a time when I was upset at him for not caring about his schoolwork. I was concerned since all of the math he was learning would help him in his future math classes when he gets to high school. For myself, I have had trouble with math in high school because I never paid attention when I was his age. So I talked to him about the high expectations I had for him to do better and then coincidentally, my parents talked to him about the same expectations as well. My little brother's grades slowly improved.

Whenever I visit family members in LA, it is heartbreaking for me to see them struggling to survive, all stressed about how they are going to make it tomorrow because of bills, mortgages and my cousins always acting up.

Seeing my family stressed and struggling motivates me to stay in school. Whenever I want to go down to LA, it feels burdening to hear, "You're gonna have to wait things out because things are

not together down here," meaning "I don't have enough money for you to come down and visit right now."

I know I am just a generation away from poverty. But though I came from it doesn't mean I have to accept it or continue it.

My parents are busy trying to make ends meet by paying bills, providing food for the whole household, and keeping my siblings and I clothed. They are trying to make sure we are taken care of.

Even though it may sound like I love school, there have been times when I have wanted to drop out myself. All the tests, homework, finals, and teachers. I have gotten so frustrated in math that I used to think, why bother if this grade isn't going to change? Or sometimes I wonder that if I still don't understand a math concept even after 3 years, I should just give up already!

Many of my classes were boring, waiting for the teacher to teach after writing referral after referral for students who seemed to not know how to behave in class, or in public for that matter.

This issue of dropping out doesn't just involve students, but also involves teachers. If teachers don't take an interest in the student then the student won't take an interest in the class. This lack of interest can create a barrier in the classroom for many students, who then become apathetic about the educational system and their own futures.

I know I am just a generation away from poverty.

But as I kept in mind that I am a generation away from poverty, I continued to work hard in school. I challenged myself and took Gate classes. Then I took Honors courses and moved up to AP.

These classes were challenging to take, but that didn't kill me, I adapted. When I was taking Physics Gate, I became frustrated with the concepts of the formulas

used to calculate distance. Everyone in the class knew them except me! I had to come out of my comfort zone of being prideful and then I had to sacrifice my lunch period. Instead of hanging out with friends, I went to my Physics teacher for help. In a few weeks I was caught up and no longer left in the dark.

The only way students can break the dropout cycle is to not give up. I encourage you to challenge not only yourself, but also the environment in which you are learning.

When I wanted to speak with my counselor about my lack of interest in a subject, I set an appointment. One time my appointment was set two weeks before Christmas break and I didn't end up seeing my counselor until we returned from break, which was the next year! So I've learned not to set appointments, and I've learned not to give up on my future no matter what.

Now, when I want to see my counselor, I simply walk in and see if she is busy. If so, I wait, and if not, I walk in.

DROPOUT CRISIS IN FRESNO

By Roberto Corralejo and Jennifer Gaxiola

Roosevelt High School students, CATALYST Ambassadors and FresYES Youth Media Consultants (Center for Multicultural Cooperation)

A dropout crisis is happening in Fresno. One-third of students in Fresno drop out before they graduate from high school. The dropout rate is 25% statewide. Almost half of Latino, African-American and Southeast Asian students drop out! This dropout crisis threatens the economy and quality of life in Fresno.

The Youth Graduation Empowerment Summit is calling all students who are worried about their future to come and join us. Help us take action to bring success for all students!

Come to the Summit at the Sanctuary, 2336 Calaveras St. in Fresno on January 31, 2009 from 9:30AM – 3PM. Registration and lunch are free, but you need to email Aleiba Moreno at the Fresno County Office of Education (amoreno@fcoe.k12.ca.us, Phone: 559-265-3002).

If you want to help with planning the Summit, come to the Youth Service Council meeting on Monday, January 12, 5:30PM at the Center for Multicultural Cooperation, 2425 Fresno St. in room 201.

Fresno is one of 5 cities in California that have the highest dropout rates. These five cities will conduct summits to decide how to respond to the dropout crisis. Adults are helpful, but we need more youth to help plan the summit. Students' ideas should be heard and put into action. Students should be involved and have a voice in solving this crisis, not just adults!

The Youth Graduation Empowerment Project (YGEP) is a primarily student-led program designed to bring young people together with policy makers to address the dropout crisis. This is a great way for students to increase their leadership skills and learn how to have an effective voice in policies that will play a role in the education and future of all students and their families. With the help of our adult leaders, we can solve this overwhelming crisis!

SPEAK UP!

Learn the Facts:
Over 1/3 of Fresno students drop out of school before they graduate!

FRESNO YOUTH GRADUATION EMPOWERMENT SUMMIT

**JANUARY 31, 2009
9:30 AM TO 3 PM**

**LOCATION:
THE SANCTUARY
2336 CALAVERAS ST.**

Sponsored by:
The Center for Multicultural Cooperation
Fresno County Office of Education

To Register and for more information, please contact:
Aleiba Moreno, Fresno County Office of Ed.
amoreno@fcoe.k12.ca.us,
Phone: (559)265-3002

Grades and Graduation: My Fight To Succeed

By "Violet"

"Caps and gowns mean that graduation day is finally here, seeing faces that have been so familiar for the past four years, all around you, comforting you on one of the biggest days of your life. Sitting in your rows, flickering with your fingers, wondering what this great world has in store for you while hoping you won't be so nervous and drop the diploma on your way offstage."

I thought I wasn't going to be able to graduate with my class since I was so behind in credits. I believed I would be in high school one more year than I would have to be. I knew I was going down the wrong path, always staying out late, never turning in my work on

time, failing all my tests, and falling asleep in class. This wasn't the way I pictured my high school education.

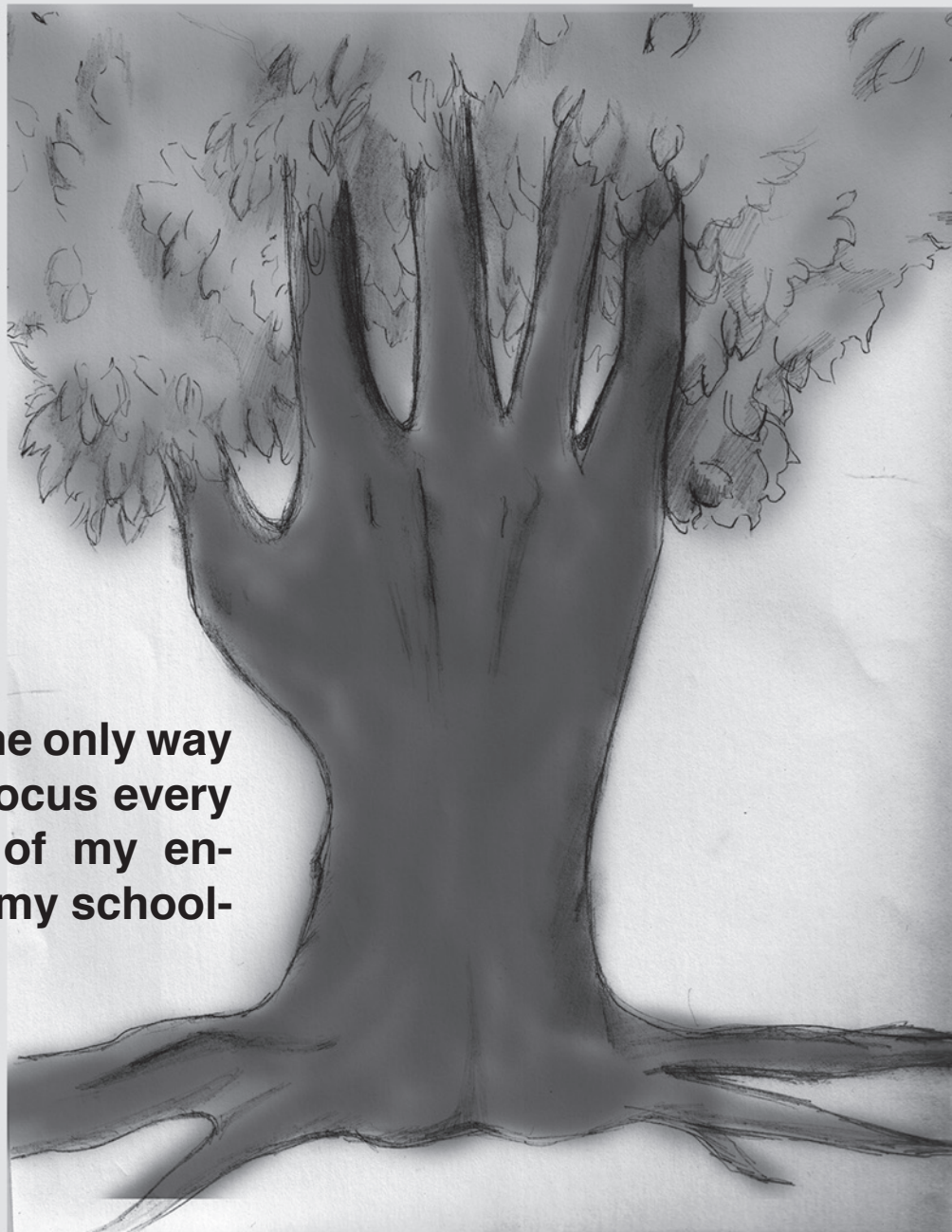
Luckily I turned everything around before it got worse. It seems like today more than half of underclassmen are all going down the wrong path. I see them every morning with their bloodshot eyes, talking to friends about how they failed the test they just took, how they are planning to ditch their next period since they have a test, or how they fell asleep while listening to Mr. Heigers lecture about velocity. Hopefully they find the path they need to take before things go bad.

I knew something was wrong when all my friends almost had double the credits I had. I was embarrassed to show them my progress report since I already knew they would say, "You're dumb" or "Ha! You're stupid."

I couldn't stand being left behind. Something had to change. It was the end of the first semester of my sophomore year and my grades weren't that bad nor were they that good. They were average, so I knew there was room for improvement. That meant no

Continued on Pg. 20

**I knew the only way
was to focus every
last bit of my en-
ergy on my school-
work.**



Art by: Jaleesa Vickers

Miss Independent:

Landing My First Real Job

By LaKenya Stamps

Money, money, money! These days that's all I hear, especially from teens. Teens today struggle with finances, whether it's paying a cell phone bill or paying for a school expense. There is no way around it, let's face it, TEENS NEED MONEY!

Of course teens can't always depend on parents to buy everything so then the question comes, why not get a job?

Some say having a job and going to school causes lack of time for studies. By taking on the responsibility of having a job, some issues may come, such as having to work nights because you have school during the day, which can lead to sleeping in class and also no time to study.

Having a job while going to school can also lead to stress. Some young adults worry about how they will get to work, or how they are so tired to go to work. Some parents even object to the idea of their son/daughter keeping a part-time job. Others believe that as young adults, we have to live up to that title, which means saving money as an adult would, being on time for work, making choices with money, and setting boundaries between work and school.

I have a friend who is working at KFC and also going to school. I asked her if it is hard for her to balance both school and having a part-time job. She exclaimed, "Yes! My grades are up and down and I'm always late to my first period class." She says working late hours deprives her of waking up on time for school.

Yet others find that having a job is a great way to show independence, responsibility, and getting ready for the "real world".

Another friend of mine has a weekend job and he makes it known that he has excellent grades while holding that job. "I love my job," he exclaims. "Working at Tilly's in Riverpark is exciting. I see my friends most of the time, and it's only a weekend job so it doesn't affect my school time." He says he has a job to pay for his upcoming senior bills so he can show his parents that he is responsible.

In my opinion, having a job helps teens in many ways. In some cases, you don't have to depend on anyone for money. And also you're working toward being an adult. Many jobs require work experience and if you have no experience, that's taking one step back from getting a bigger job in the near future.

For me, I'm working two jobs. One is at an IHOP restaurant as a Hostess, and the other is as a Writer for this magazine, The kNow. At IHOP I work weekends only and at The kNow, I attend meetings Mondays and Wednesdays. Any other day in between, I am either studying or cleaning my room.

Having two jobs has been hard sometimes. Some days I don't want to get out of bed and go to work at IHOP. But I know that having a job there accelerates my people skills, and writing for The kNow helps me in English class.

At first my aunt, the person I live with, felt that having multiple jobs was a bit much. But soon she saw I could handle it, and that I was able to take on the responsibility.

I chose to have a job at first, with The kNow, for the extra money since we receive a small stipend every week. Then came having to pay my phone bill. I didn't have anyone who would pay it for me, so I decided to take it upon myself to pay for it every month.

When I began to receive my stipends from The kNow, I noticed that the money I was earning was going to waste. I would spend it on junk food, treating my friends when we went out, or paying bus fare. I had to find another way to pay my phone bill.

One day I was on the Internet looking for a job, when my cousin sent me a text message about some gossip. Then I remembered she worked at IHOP! A light clicked on in my mind. Bingo, I thought! She was the key to my extra money.

So I asked her if there were any open job positions at IHOP. She text me back with a "yes". I was excited, so I replied with "do u think I can fill the spot?" I waited anxiously for her to respond.

Then she text me back with a "YES" again! Next thing I knew, I had my red collar IHOP shirt, name tag, black slacks, and black slip-resistant shoes, ready to get to work!

Now that I have this job at IHOP, I have the responsibility of getting there on time. I usually work weekend mornings and getting to and from the restaurant can be tough. The buses don't run early enough on weekends. So to make sure I'm there on time, I spend the night at a friend's house every weekend. She doesn't live too far and I can even walk.

Some say it's hard to find a job, and it can be. I tried many times and applied for many jobs until I got hired with the help of a family member. It's good to know someone who is connected to some kind of business. I advise teens to get into programs where they can get connected to other people.

So as you can see, there are benefits to having a job while in school. Students just have to take it upon themselves to balance it out, set boundaries, and have a planner. Maybe you should only work weekends on a job or weeknights, but only if you can handle it. Don't stress yourself out if you are a young adult. Have fun! Consider getting a job. It will help you out in the future.



False Imprisonment: A Day In The Bay

By Kevis McGee

My friends and I just wanted to get out and have some fun. About six months ago, we decided to take a day trip to San Francisco. We were not prepared for what was going to happen.

There was Jerry, a funny but crazy individual who enjoys music for its lyrics more than its sound (I share a similar trait). Then there's Tom, also another very funny person who prefers R&B over rap. Trevor is one of the funniest people I've ever met. In my opinion, he should be a stand-up comedian. And last but not least, there's Chris, the driver. He has a unique mixture of being serious and funny at the same time.

That day, we got to San Francisco safely in a few hours. The Bay Bridge looked amazing. It blew us away! We turned our music up to its max, listening to Baygate. As soon as we got off the bridge, there was glitter all over the sidewalks.

About an hour and two pit stops later, we arrived at Pier 39. We walked around, looked at street performers, and chilled. But I'm going to fast-forward a little bit.

We ended up at the beach just hanging out and walking around.

Then Jerry and Tom dared each other to jump in the ocean. They proceeded to do so and then they needed towels. Chris went to get towels and park the car closer. While waiting, we decided to sit on the beach and talk. To our right, a man (who looked in his mid-20s) supposedly had sat on some girls' belongings. The girls and the man started arguing and another man, apparently backing up the girls, came over and yelled, "Is there a problem?"

And before the other guy could answer, he was knocked unconscious by one punch from the guy who asked the question. The girls then proceeded to get in his pockets, took his wallet, and ran away. Chris drove up and we decided to leave because we couldn't risk the police and ambulance blocking the road. We had to get back to Fresno.

We set out to the Bay Bridge and were driving along the street that housed all the piers. We were on this street for about five minutes before we stopped at a red light. Then a police cruiser zoomed passed us and parked in front of the van that was in front of us, making sure our path was blocked off completely.

Suddenly they hopped out of their cars and charged to our car with guns drawn and were yelling at the top of their lungs, "Get out

Continued on Pg. 20



The Beat Within



A Weekly Publication of Writing and Art from the Inside

Voices From the Fresno County Juvenile Justice Campus

The Beat Within, a program of Pacific News Service/New America Media that provides writing workshops and a weekly publication for incarcerated youth nationwide, has expanded to include Fresno! Every week, The kNOW staff and volunteers conduct workshops at the Fresno County JJC. Here are a few select pieces.

The Beat Within, Fresno Team is made up of Patricia Johnson, Nigel Medhurst, Ashleigh Rocker, Lily Romero, Mai Der Vang and Rosie Wentz

Becoming A Man

In two years, I will become a man.
But there's something I need to understand.
And that is, what is a man?
Most people say there are men who have a boy's mind.
Ain't doing crap, just wasting their time.
But I'm not, I just need a sign.
I'm locked down doing time.
Man this ain't for me,
In ten years, I wonder where I'll be.
I want to do good but things go wrong.
I gotta keep my head up and I gotta be strong.
But all in my insides, I'm hurting.
Trying to stay positive but nothing is working.
But yet what is a man?
In two years, I pray to God I'll understand.

-Jerome

To: Carlos

I look up in the sky to see if I can see you, but can't. When it rains, it feels like you're kissing me. When the sun comes up, it feels like you're hugging me. I love you. I want to believe you're not gone, that you're alive, living and waiting for me to get out of this place. Baby I miss you so much that I just don't know what to do anymore. When I go to sleep I feel like you're holding me. I get this feeling like you're with me, and now that you're gone, I still get that feeling.

A family is life. A gang is streets. God is everything. JJC is lock down. Me just a person. People take things for granted. They make up lies to get other people mad at them. Girls need to know that God will take your life like that if you don't follow or listen to him. I know life is hard but you just have to try to make it better. If you're having a bad day, try to make it a better day. If you can't have a good day, try to think of something good. Don't let anyone mess up your good day. Sometimes life can be awful that you really don't care about living. You wish for everything but you aren't happy when life goes wrong. You think it's your fault but it's not your fault at all.

I met a guy in my life. He cared a lot about me. We were together for nine months. He was mad at me for doing drugs. Carlos didn't like drugs at all. When I met him I was walking down the street to a homeboy's house. I thought Carlos was sent to save me from the streets, drugs, and the gangs. We were to get married but he got killed right in front of my eyes. No matter what, he's alive in my heart. I cry for him to come back. RIP Carlos 4-4-86 to 2-17-07.

-Candice

There's Always A Tomorrow

It does not take
A brand new start,
It only takes the deepest desire,
To try with all our heart
To live a little better
And to always be forgiving
And to add a little sunshine
To the world in which are living
So never give up on it all
And think you're through.
For there's always tomorrow,
And a chance to start anew.
Big girls don't cry
Tears may roll down my face,
But tissues wipe them away,
Today it rained on my parade,
But tomorrow starts a new day.

-Pound Cake

My Life

When I was two, I was taken away from my parents because they used drugs and they couldn't take care of my siblings and I. That is one day I will never forget. After that day I've never been the same. I was put into foster homes, and I just couldn't handle what had happened. So I started messing up my life. I've been in and out of seventeen foster homes in six years and about nine different group homes. I've been in and out of Juvenile Hall and boot camp. I think about that day mostly everyday, and it still hurts to think that my parents would let me and my siblings go over some drugs. I'm seventeen now, and until this day I can't find it in my heart to forgive my parents; even when I did live with my parents I had a rough life. I never had the best of clothes, and we never really had that much food. I remember kids used to make fun of me. I used to wish I could just help my parents become better people. But over time I had enough strength to be a better person, and not let other people bring me down. I hope one day I will forgive my parents.

-Israel

Thug Mansion

In the song, Thug Mansion, by 2Pac, he describes a paradise, a place where all the true Gs go, a place where you don't have to worry about the fake wannabes. A place to chill and live life like it is supposed to be lived. Where money and everything else means nothing. Where you don't have to be rich or poor and colors don't matter. If there is a place for me it would be with Pac and all the other true Gs that have passed into.-D

The Beat Within

A Weekly Publication of Writing and Art from the Inside



A Pain of Life

As a child growing up in a trailer park, I experienced a lot of pain. My mom was an alcoholic and a drug addict. I grew up watching her waste her life away smoking marijuana and drinking. This got to be too much for my dad. So he left me and my other three sisters.

My mom was never at the house so my oldest sister Amanda would take care of us. She taught my sisters and I how to take a bath, brush our hair and teeth. My mom never had a job so my sisters and I wore the same handed-down clothes. My dad called me one day and told me he was getting married to someone who would soon become my evil stepmother. My dad wanted custody of us because my mom got locked up. So at age eight, I went to live with my dad and step-mom. The first few years were great. Then at age 11, the abuse started. It started verbally, my step-mom calling me foul names and telling me I wasn't my dad's child because I had blonde hair and blue eyes, and my mom and dad have brown hair and brown eyes.

Then the abuse got worst. She started hitting my sisters and I, and kicking us. One day it got so bad that when she pushed me I fell and broke my arm. I still have the scars today so I'll remember that day till I die. My sister would tell her teacher that she was locked in the closet and the teacher would call CPS, but then my step-mom would put on an act. She would tell her three biological kids not to tell CPS so it made us look like a bunch of liars. After they left, my sister would get beaten for telling. As I grew older, instead of growing stronger, I grew weaker, until I got into the system. I was glad to go to juvenile hall because I thought it would be better than living there. That's my story.

-Petrille

No Moment 2 Rest

Life through my blood shot eyes would scare a square to death.

Poverty, murder, violence and never a moment to rest.

You lost everything and found out nothing was left.

I was a devil child born in 1991.

Ever since I got locked up, everything was done.

After a while, this comes to no fun.

From now on my mind is set to do right.

And if I follow it my days will be bright.

But it doesn't matter if you bang red or blue.

If you thank the man above, then God will bless you.

So now I'm sitting in this weird place.

I'm about to meet the judge with tears on my face.

Thinking about how much time I'm gonna do.

See what happens when you run the streets with them dumb fools.

You thought it was right but that crap ain't cool.

Now I'm going to put this to an end.

I hope this never comes back to me again.

-James

Someone To Turn To

As I was growing up I had a lot of struggles in my life. I didn't have both parents. My mom was on drugs and didn't care about me. My stepfather used to beat me. I always used to run away. As I got a little older I realized that wasn't the life I wanted. I started doing drugs when I was nine to hide my feelings because I had no one to go to for help. I got locked up, and always got kicked out of school for fighting. Then I started joining gangs because I thought that was where my family was, then I realized that's not who I wanted to be. I didn't care

what happened to me whether alive or dead because I had no one to attend to me. I didn't care about my mom or what happened to her.

On my 16th birthday, I had my daughter. Since I didn't care for my life I was thirty minutes late for her birth and I regret that day. Then I tried to straighten out my life but it was hard. It felt like everyone was against me so I was on my own helping myself. Then on December 31 of the following year, my son was born. I was there and will never forget that day. Now that I'm 17 years old, it's hard for me because till this day I still don't have anyone to go to. Now I have stopped doing drugs. I wish I never stopped but I have to for my kids. I am a father. Thank you for letting me express my feelings.

-Manuel

Self-Expressing Artist

I've always been a person who keeps to myself and never talks about my feelings. Maybe that's why I'm always so mad. I never liked to express myself. Then I found a way to express myself. But that got me into trouble. I loved what I was doing. I was expressing myself and I felt better. I loved it! I was expressing myself through graffiti art. I wasn't doing it in public places, but where I was doing it was still illegal. I got caught. I am a self-expressing artist and for expressing myself, I got locked up.

-Christian





Blog Writings

Our Thoughts Our Words

Obama's Inauguration

By Jesse

Tuesday, January 20, 2009

The inauguration of President Barack Obama to me means change. I come from a family of alcoholics and drug addicts. I am 17 years old. My life was not easy. I have overcome the pressures of generational curses and have been drug and alcohol free. This means change for me. That there is still hope for my future, that I should never give up, and that I will continue to press forward.

The inauguration gives me the sense of endless possibilities. That just because I am poverty stricken does not mean I have to stay that way. The inauguration day will mark an important day of my success as an African American male who has all the odds against him. It gives me the courage to pursue my dream of going to college to become a doctor, doing the things I love best, helping people.

On my resume, my job objective states, "To inspire, educate and grow in the present world while lending a hand to those that are in need, in my community and in my life." I can't forget those who are struggling because I know what it is to struggle. As a senior in high school, I had to support myself the whole four years. Yes my father is around but he couldn't pay for the various activities that I was part of keep to keep myself off the streets and out of gangs.

I know that being able to watch and keep up with Barack Obama was the best decision I have made in my life, along with saying no to drugs, telling people I don't do those types of things, and being community-minded while making a difference in West Fresno. I have helped encourage myself through helping others.

This historic day marks the day of my success! I am proud to be an awesome role model to my brothers and sisters that they can achieve greatness because greatness is within. They can see that I didn't fall in the trap that was set for me and didn't fall for the negativity. I have made great progress and I am a testimony for other young men like myself. That's what the inauguration means to me.

Let's Stay Together

By LaKenya

Monday, January 5, 2009

"Leeeet's, let's stay together...loving you whetherrrr, whetherrrr times are good or bad, happy or sad."

My grandma and I vowed we would always stay together as Al Green emphasized. She would be cooking in the kitchen, making her famous peach cobbler for the family. Then the radio would sing "Smooth Jazz 96.7". Soon after, "our song" would come on, "Let's Stay Together." We would dance and sing all throughout the kitchen until my stubborn sister would come in with an attitude. But her attitude didn't

stop our vibe. We danced for the whole two minutes and something seconds and even afterwards.

My grandmother is no longer with us. She has passed on. But every time that song comes on, I still dance and sing as if she was right there with me, telling me let's stay together.

Poem: The Fact

By Victoria

December 9, 2008

The fact that I'm smiling
when I'm sad.

The fact that I'm laughing
when I'm angry.

The fact that no matter what
I won't break this character,
but until I do.

I will lose the friends I thought I would have to infinity
are gone by the seconds.

In this day, this one day
Everything is gone and far.

So however I try to write it out,
to sing it out,

to SCREAM it out,
it's there

and it's crappy.

It's called loneliness.

The fact that stress will never go away.

The fact that hate never fades away.

The fact that now an enemy is called a friend.

The fact that I'm angry and I can't be.

So I must put a smile;

tell a joke, and laugh;

when inside

everything is crumbling.

A Horrible Fight On A Good Day

By Anna

Friday, August 15, 2008

It was my goddaughter's confirmation party. We were all at her house. It was her parents, brothers, sisters, her sister's boyfriend, me, the homies, and some other people. We were all watching a movie and then we started to eat some beef and rice. It was really good. After eating, we all went outside to talk and hang out. We ended up going to the store across the street.

When we got back home, two of my goddaughter's older brothers came over. They all ate and I went inside the house to use the restroom. When I came out, her dad and one brother (the oldest) were arguing. I was about to go outside when her dad came out of the room with a knife. It's not one of those small ones, I mean, it's one of those big ones that Mexicans use to chop down a tree or when they are walking through a forest full of vines, and they use that to cut the vines down to get through. But anyways, her dad starts going after the brother and then I almost got hit in the face.

This was a scary moment. I started crying a lot and couldn't move. Thank goodness nothing happened and her brothers left.

Youth forum findings on school violence.

In 2008, students throughout the Fresno area experienced a series of school lockdowns provoked by youth violence:

- April 16, 2008: a student at Roosevelt High School attacked an on-campus officer and was shot and killed by the officer.
- May 5, 2008: four teens were arrested behind a local middle school for firing a gun that went off during a fight.
- June 4, 2008: three high school students were arrested after a stabbing incident where they made pacts to stab each other.

These and other incidents encouraged The kNow to have a deeper dialogue with young people to find out the sources as well as the solutions to these issues. On September 29, 2008, The kNow held a youth forum, Lockdown On School Violence, to survey young people about their opinion on school safety. Over 100 community members, elected officials, and students attended.

Among the 52 youth participants polled (61% female, 39% male), 42% said they had started a fight, and 35% said they had been a victim of violence at school. An overwhelming 94% had witnessed at least one fight at school, and 33% had witnessed more than five fights. Only 37% said they had ever tried to stop a fight – and we learned in the breakout discussions that most students don't try to intervene in fights because they don't want to get hurt, or they don't want to get accused by school staff for somehow being involved in the fight.

- 76% of participants cited rumors/gossip as the primary cause of fights – contrary to the stereotype that gangs are the primary cause.

Recommendations:

- o Provide more conflict mediation and communication training to students so they understand how messages can become distorted and lead to misconceptions.
- o Engage student leaders in defining a school culture that cuts down on problematic gossip and negative inter-school rivalries.

- 74% of participants agreed that bullying is a cause of school violence.

Recommendation:

- o Instead of suspending students who get into fights or students who bully others, offer those students counseling with a consistent adult who can be trusted. Counseling can help to understand that student's life/family situation and help build self-esteem/confidence to promote more positive interaction with other students.

- 41% of participants said talking to their peers and other students

would help them best grieve if someone were to die at their school from a school violence incident.

Recommendation:

- o Expand peer-counseling programs that train students in mentoring and conflict mediation.

- Only 11% of participants felt that their school officials/staff were

doing a good job of handling fights. 43% of participants agreed that when a fight breaks out, no adult arrives to the scene usually for a while. Also, 86% of participants cited they had witnessed a verbal fight between a student and teacher, and 40% had witnessed a physical fight.

Recommendations:

- o Provide more training opportunities and staff development for teachers and Campus Assistants so they feel better prepared to handle fights.

- 33% of participants agreed that keeping students busy doing other fun stuff would decrease the amount of school fights.

Recommendations:

- o Keep students busy with activities that involve creativity such as art, media, graphic design or activities that build teamwork and leadership skills. Start these activities in elementary school and continue them through middle and high school.
- o Tension between racial/ethnic groups can lead to fights. Create more opportunities for students to build cross-cultural understanding to reduce cultural stereotypes, misconceptions and racist attitudes.

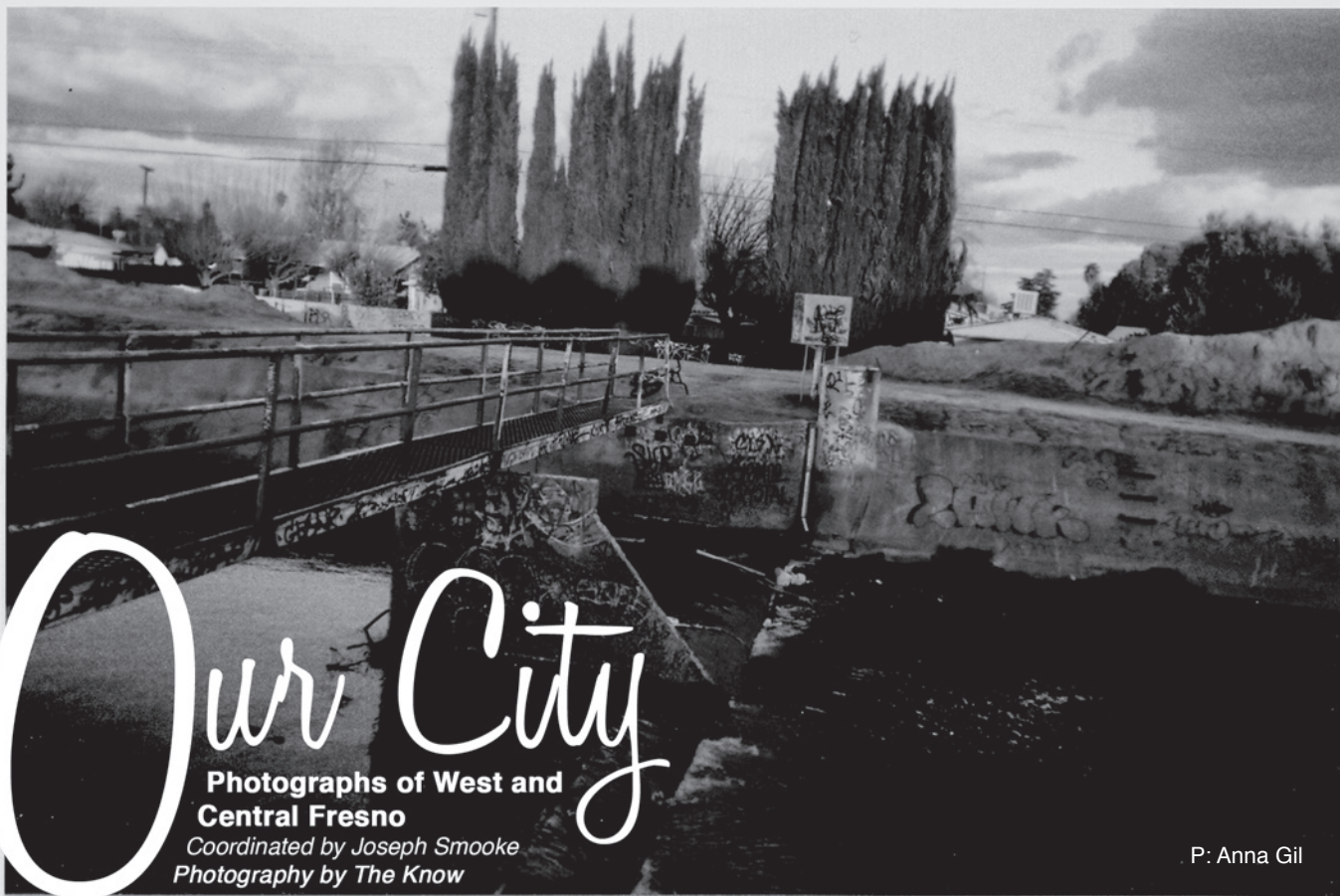
- 35% said they don't know their school's rule on disciplinary action, and only 20% said they fully agree with those rules.

Recommendation:

- o Teachers or school officials need to take a more active role in explaining and clarifying the policy to students.

- Only 8% of participants said they would seek help if they saw a fight break out and most participants during the small group discussion did not know about Crime Stoppers, a telephone hotline that allows callers to pass on anonymous crime tips. Recommendations:

- o Once a fight is planned it spreads quickly through word of mouth and text messaging. Use students' strong communication networks as a resource for stopping fights before or after they start.
- o School officials should promote the Crime Stoppers anonymous reporting program. Most students don't want to openly "snitch" on other students. Students should be given an easy way to text message information to Crime Stoppers.



Our City

**Photographs of West and
Central Fresno**

*Coordinated by Joseph Smooke
Photography by The Know*

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P: Kevis McGee



P: Patrice Word

FRESNO

Our City

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DAMAGED BY LOVE:

My Story

By Demar Duncan

Relationships! That word doesn't mean much to me. It has been used against me. How is everyone with someone, and I am alone? It hurts me so much. I hear all these songs about love and relationships, and they make me want to throw a chair across the room! Love songs and how people act when they're in love, everyone, not just teens, I don't like the feeling.

To see my friends have someone in their life makes me feel hurt. I don't have someone. There have been days where I have felt so low and sad because I don't have anyone to put a smile on my face and make me feel happy about myself. Usually when that happens, I come home from school and lay in bed for the rest of the day, crying.

When I am at school and work, my sadness makes me unable to concentrate. I remember one time I was in class looking out the window, off in my own little world thinking about my girlfriend (which I had at the time). Then my teacher asked me something and I didn't know what she was talking about. My teacher got mad and told me to leave her class.

Whenever I hear the song "Baby I Love You" by 1st Lady, I feel sad. In the song, the girl says she really loves the guy and that she will never let him go. It makes me think about my life and how I don't have anyone near me telling me they love me.

Sometimes I want it to show but I cry inside all the time. I hide it with a big smile. That smile fools everyone and makes people think I am happy when I am not.

Growing up in my family, I was an only child and my mom and dad were never home, so I didn't get the love or support I needed. I see how other families get along. You see them playing games or laughing and hanging out at events. Not my family though. We fight and yell at each other. My parents never tell me they love me. Even when I try to say it and hug my mom, she pushes me away. So now I am looking for that one that can fill this empty space in my heart.

I tell my friends about my sadness, and all they say is that it's going to be okay. They don't give me a lot of emotional support, that's why I hide behind my smile. I don't just open up to many people, so it is hard for me to tell people about my life. You readers are lucky I am telling you all this.

I've learned that relationships can mess up friendships. I once had a friend who picked his girlfriend over me. He had this girl I was cool with until he kept bringing her around and kissing her in front of me, which was messed up. But I didn't say anything. He started

not to hang out with me and wouldn't look for me at lunch, so I was like, "I'm done, I don't need a friend like that." A few months later she dumped him and he came looking for me telling me to hang out with him. I told him no, and that I have other friends that won't leave me for some chick. I still see him around but we don't talk anymore. I have many friends like that. I know it can be hard to balance a friendship and a relationship, but he shouldn't have dissed me like that.

When my last relationship ended, I gathered all of the stuff she and I got on our dates and put them in the trash. I watched them burn to ashes. I did this because I couldn't stand looking at the past. All those great times we spent together, at the movies, around town. The tickets I saved, the pictures we took at the Fresno Fair. These things made me think of her so much I cried almost every night. To see her at school hurt. So I stopped going and tried to forget her all at once. It worked. But then I had to go back to school and when I saw her again, it didn't hurt as much. I gave it time and it went away slowly, but it wasn't gone.

I am looking for that one that can fill this empty space in my heart.

I told myself I was not going to let her hurt me anymore even though I still love her. She hurt me badly by being very dishonest about something that happened between us. I can't get over how it used to be with her, the times we spent at her house, the fun we had with our friends. But all good things come to an end.

For now, I have a small crush on someone. No one seems to know since I don't let it show, but the pain of the past doesn't go away. It comes back every now and then and makes me want to cry. I still kept this one thing my ex gave me and I look at it when I think of her.

I feel like I'm ready to give up on love 'cause all it has done to me is make me cry, even cut myself sometimes. But now I know not to let it control me because I am stronger. I still have moments when those feelings come back, but I'm not going to let them overtake me. I tell myself over and over "I am strong and I can do anything."

When I hear the song "Can't Bring Me Down" by Karina Pasian, it makes me feel better. It reminds me that as long as I have myself, all I need is to keep my head up 'cause no one can bring me down but me.

Hip Hop Mimi: My Sister, My Inspiration

By Patrice Word

Mishalene Bloom, better known as "Hip Hop Mimi" or just "Mimi" to the family, was born in Los Angeles, but she grew up right here in the "NO".

Mimi describes her childhood as being full of exploration and creativity. It was a time when she had no cares in the world. She grew up in West Fresno. Even though her life at home was not all gravy she always kept a smile.

She remembers that she and her cousins would ride their bikes for hours. Mimi always felt a sense of safety in her neighborhood.

"The cool thing I love about growing up in Fresno was the community," she says. The community was always planning events for youth such as talent shows, baseball games, field trips, and fashion shows, and Mimi was always doing them all!

At the age of 7, Mimi started writing songs. The first time she realized she wanted to pursue music was when she moved to Long Beach at the age of 21. Moving from Fresno to Long Beach was hard, but that didn't matter because it was the first step toward achieving her dream. It was Mimi against the world.

At first it was hard because she was her worst enemy. "The only person that was discouraging me was myself," she says. Mimi believed she had to sound just like everyone else. Good thing she had her family there to support her.

Mimi started her ladder to the top by creating a demo of different songs. "It was strange to hear myself on the mic," she says laughing. She tried all different styles of music. She sang jazz, country, R&B, and even rock, just to get a feel for all of them, and she ended up sticking to rock.

Currently, Mimi is an elementary school teacher. One day while teaching dance steps to kids, a parent asked her not to play pop songs. "A light bulb clicked on," Mimi says. From then on she knew she wanted to do music for children.

It took a while to figure that out. So she tried working with a different producer to help develop her own unique style. The man for the job was Donald Roberson also known as XL. "He really pulled the artist out of me," says Mimi. He had a lot of faith in her even when others couldn't see her vision.

Mimi started on her way into the world of children's music. She believes it was her true calling all along. "My inspiration," she says, "is putting a smile on a kid's face when they listen to my music."

Everyday the teachers, parents and kids would inspire her to pursue her passion with music. "Kids are the future," says Mimi. She believes it's important to reach the youth before it's too late...and music is a good tool to use to reach out to them. Not only that, but it is important to make positive music for kids.

Her album, titled "I Got A Message To Say" covered all the above. "It's important to encourage youth to love themselves," she says, "because there are so many drop-outs because of low self-esteem." Mimi believes many youth don't care because no one else cares, so they give up.

She learned in her life, no matter what happens, you have the key to change bad to good. Also you can't blame any one but yourself. You are still in control of your life no matter how old you are. So love yourself, make the right choices, learn from the bad mistakes and don't look back.

"I am so blessed," says Mimi, "I thank God everyday for waking me up and giving me another day to share my talents. I work at a school and I love it, I love dancing and helping people."

Now Mimi is doing her thang! Now she is doing shows all the time! Even though she has a million jobs to pay the bills, she still finds the time! She is even working on a children's book. She wants to spread her love to kids around the world, so she sees traveling in her future.

I bet many of you are wondering why am I writing about this topic. Mimi is my big sister, and as a young lady I struggle with a lot, whether it is school, or my image, or even small things like finding inspiration to get out of bed in the morning. Mimi is my motivation. She had vision and a dream, and even though she was discouraged and put down, she never gave up.

Just to be around my sister is a blessing. I feel graced by her words of encouragement. She could be in a room full of people and all the attention would just sway to her. To have that ability after everything she has been through is inspiring. Seeing the way she lights up when she talks about her students shows me just how much she loves her job and her kids. I can see Mimi has found true happiness in her life.

So I encourage you to find that something that does the same for you, and gets you out of bed every morning.



Con. from Pg 14

more concerts or after parties, limiting my going out to once a week and trying to focus on my priorities and my future education. This would be hard, but I knew it could be done.

The next semester of my sophomore year, I was going to take it seriously with no more distractions. If I wanted to succeed in my life, I knew the only way was to focus every last bit of my energy on my schoolwork. That semester I spent most of my time doing my schoolwork and my free time in a classroom studying for a test or trying to get extra help.

I remember one time when my friends asked me to go out to see Eyes Set To Kill on a Tuesday night. I had the greatest urge to say yes because they were my favorite band at the time, but I knew I needed to do better in school and couldn't afford any more distractions. Sadly, I had to decline the offer and study for my Algebra 2 test, which was extremely hard.

At the time, I felt excluded from my friends because it seemed like the only time I got to see them was when I passed by them around school, and I just smiled and waved.

I worked my butt off that whole semester trying to maintain a 3.0 GPA and balancing seven classes and night school to make up for the credits I blew off my freshman year. At the end of the year, it all paid off. I got the 3.0 GPA I wanted and most of the credits I needed. But I knew that wouldn't be enough. That meant summer school.

My summer was spent in summer school learning about the American Civil War and how JFK built the Panama Canal to rapidly quicken American trade. While I was in a cold, dark prison of learning, my friends were at home sleeping their day away watching cartoons in their pajamas all day long.

But I knew I had brought this upon myself and there was no one else to blame but me. I had to stick it out that long summer in one

classroom for six hours straight with a 15-minute break.

Once it was all over, everything paid off. I was no longer behind in credits; I was ahead. But my academic GPA was struggling. I knew I would need a better GPA to get into a good college.

I am now a junior and wiser than what I was before. I know the only way I can possibly obtain the GPA I need to get into a good college is to get a 3.5 both semesters of my junior and senior years. It seems like most of my days are focused entirely on school and cheer practice. Once school is over, I go straight to practice, and once practice is over, I go straight back to the books. The first semester of my junior year ended with the GPA I wanted, but now I'm just hoping that the end of my junior year ends up the same way.

I know I was naïve during my freshman and sophomore years of high school, but now I've changed that for the better. If I keep going down the path I'm on, I could possibly graduate earlier than the rest of my classmates.

But I know I'm not going to. I can't see myself graduating with a bunch of seniors I don't even know. I would be more comfortable, on that special day, sitting in rows with the people I have been around for the whole four years of my high school experience. They have been there for me in my times of need and are potentially going to be lifelong friends.

"Finally your row stands up. You, with a big grin on your face, start looking around to see if your parents are waving at you. Slowly you start walking up to the stage. You hear your name called, you reach out for your high school diploma, the one piece of paper you've been working so hard to achieve. Shaking the hand of your high school principal, you walk offstage and feel the relief of graduation."

Con. from Pg 16

of the car and lay on the ground!" There were about twelve of them shouting at the same time, but just not in sync, so I couldn't understand them unless I focused on the voice of one officer.

I then proceeded to stick my hands out of the window since I was in the passenger's seat, and we had a two-door vehicle. I opened the door from the outside so these trigger-happy officers didn't think I was bringing out a concealed weapon. I opened the door and they yanked me out and told me to lay on the ground.

I proceeded to do so (keep in mind, I'm cooperating completely with them) and about half way on my way down, they picked me back up and slammed me back down. "Spread your arms and legs!" they commanded. "How far?" I replied. Then I could have sworn I was in the WWE because they picked me back up, and said "Get up!" Then they choke slammed me and forced me down on the ground.

I could hear Trevor in the background saying, "What did we do?" to the cop that was arresting him. After we were all handcuffed, they read us our rights and we got set up for an outside line-up. They drove the witnesses up and walked us to the middle of the street. They shined their lights on us from the car and the witnesses proceeded to identify us.

After that came one of the worst parts of the incident. Being in the back of a paddy wagon in San Francisco is no joke! The inside of it is made of nothing but metal. And with all the hills in San Francisco, it is not fun to go up and down when you're not strapped in. I swear I hit every side of that paddy wagon including the ceiling.

We then made it to the police station and were handcuffed to a bench. We were all interrogated, and had our pictures taken. I always pictured an interrogation being like what you see on TV, where

they pump fear into the alleged suspect, and then try to trick the suspect into confessing so he'll receive less time.

But it wasn't that way for me. Instead, they spent most of their time lying to me to get me to change my story. For example, after I told the detective my story, he had the nerve to tell me my story didn't add up with my friends' stories, even when we had all told the same story. I found out later on that the detective had also lied to all of my friends.

Me, Chris and Trevor were in the clear because there was no proof we had done anything. But Jerry and Tom didn't have enough proof that they didn't do anything (even though they hadn't done anything).

Because Chris was an adult, he was forced to leave on his own. Trevor couldn't get a hold of his guardian so he was transported to a temporary place to stay until they got a hold of his guardian. Luckily they got a hold of my parents and my parents had to come pick me up. I was left handcuffed to a bench for hours. Jerry and Tom were forced to go to juvenile hall. Shortly after, they both returned to Fresno and received minor punishment.

Thankfully, no one received a serious punishment. The police warned us that we should have helped the man out and not leave like we did. I always thought to mind my own business, but I guess not! Looking back on this experience, it makes me wonder how effective our law enforcement system really is because we were innocent.



It started about five years ago. It was my freshman year in high school and like many others, I felt alone. I had often kept things to myself, including my sexuality. A friend of mine introduced me to our school's GSA (Gay Straight Alliance) club. In that group, I was able to come to terms with being a young, bisexual female.

At the end of high school, I thought it was all going to end. It was hard to believe that a program like that could be found outside the school system.

I tried hard to find ways to stay socially active, but nothing came up for me. I still didn't feel like I was in the kind of "circle" I needed to be in. But then this past June, one of my good friends took me to the Youth Alliance meeting, a group similar to GSA, and I've been attending meetings ever since then.

The group welcomed me with open arms. However, I must admit that it was a little intimidating at first. Most of the youth there knew each other well and I couldn't tell who I could stick by. Taking a look around, there were youth of all ages, races, and sexual orientations. Because there were a variety of faces, I felt at ease, knowing I wouldn't be judged because of who I was.

"This is a place where you can be safe," said Jeff, the main facilitator of the group.

Then, I knew I wouldn't have to feel threatened to speak about myself, or to others. When you come to the group, you're in a room with 25, sometimes up to 40 youth. One at a time, we are asked to our name, age, and sexual orientation.

At first, I felt shy, almost vulnerable to say something like that to people I didn't know. When it came time for me to say my orientation, I would almost whisper "bisexual". I was comfortable with myself, but I wasn't comfortable with the other youth knowing what I was. I heard more names, ages, and orientations, and realized there were many others like me. In a place like this, something like sexual orientation was no big deal.

Youth Alliance has been serving the Fresno lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community for 19 years. It has provided a place for young people to be out and proud about themselves. The group comes together once a week and discusses issues affecting the gay youth community. The group is always sure it has its fun, especially with the annual Lavender Youth Prom and Queer Volleyball. We all laugh and joke around, but there are often times when we

have to get serious.

A lot of the youth share their stories of homelessness, foster care, drug abuse, and acceptance from their families. I take it all in, eventually sharing my own stories, knowing I won't be judged or scolded.

For a lot of the youth who come, it is the only place where they can break down their barriers. Sometimes, they're in situations where they can't let anyone know about their orientation. One way or another, many of us are tied together by situations like these.

Sometimes we do activities to help us learn more about ourselves and one another. Once we did an activity called "Mirror, Mirror" which required us to look at ourselves with a mirror. Other than describing what we saw on the outside, we had to say what we saw and felt on the inside. For some people, it was funny to hear what they thought about themselves, but for others, the activity brought them to tears. I wasn't chosen, but it made me reflect on who I am as a person, how I view myself, and my place in the world.

Another meeting called for us to tape paper to each other's backs and write positive comments. Everyone took turns reading their favorite responses out loud. I was surprised to see that people who didn't even know me had nice things to say about me. A few years ago, I would have never thought such a thing was possible. Being involved with this group is helping me find out more about who I am.

Almost anything goes here, except there is one simple and concrete rule—respect. Everyone must have respect for each other and themselves. It's an easy rule and is taken very seriously.

I love this group and everyone in it, and I plan to continue participating for as long as I can. It's a wonderful group and I encourage other youth to join regardless of their orientation. We come together to share two common goals—tolerance and acceptance. It's a long road, but we'll get there. That's what keeps us together.

The Youth Alliance organization meets every Friday from 7-8:30PM at the Fresno Center for Nonviolence (1584 N. Van Ness on the corner of McKinley). For more information, contact Jeff Robinson, 559-266-5465.



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