MEN WE LOVE
MEN WE HATE

STUDENTS AT THE CENTER WRITINGS
FROM DOUGLASS, MCDONOGH 35, AND MCMAIN
MEN WE LOVE
MEN WE HATE
I can tell, he is ready. He wants me to ask about his dead father. I can tell by the endless pause after I'm done speaking, the way he opens his mouth now and again and then only sighs as if to ask himself where he could possibly make himself begin.

—Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones*

The fight begins, however, in the heart and it now had been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair. This intimation made my heart heavy and, now that my father was irrecoverable, I wished that he had been beside me so that I could have searched his face for the answers that only the future could give me now.

—James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*

If the great popular masses are without a more critical understanding of how society functions, it is not because they are naturally incapable of it... but on account of the precarious conditions in which they live and survive, where they are “forbidden to know.” Thus, the way out is not ideological propaganda and political “sloganizing,” as the mechanists say it is, but the critical effort through which men and women take themselves in hand and become agents of curiosity, become investigators, become subjects of the ongoing process of quest for the revelation of the “why” of things and facts. Hence, in the area of adult literacy, for example, I have long found myself insisting on what I call a “reading of the world and a reading of the word.” Not reading of the word alone, nor a reading only of the world, but both together, in dialectical solidarity.

—Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*
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FOREWORD
“Start with what you know to learn what you don’t know. Start with where you’re at to get to where you want to go.” The Students at the Center (SAC) writing community follows this pedagogical motto in all of our work: from high school English classes in which we teach and learn, to workshops for school improvement that we conduct, to our writing with light project in which we make videos.

The writings collected in this book are rooted in what students know and experience. But the writings, like the knowledge and experience, have not developed in isolation. All of these essays and poems were written in collective settings. In classrooms at Douglass, McDonogh 35, and McMain public high schools in New Orleans students read and discussed their writings with between 10 and 30 students and at least two SAC staff members. In youth writing workshops in community settings that have included Community Book Center on Broad St. (and later just off Broad St. on Bayou Road), Holy Angels (down the street from Douglass on St. Claude Ave.), and United Teachers of New Orleans (AFT Local 527) young people have further refined these essays and poems as they read and discussed them with peers, SAC staff, parents, and community members.

*Men We Love, Men We Hate* also includes writings by teachers—a first for an SAC publication. In keeping with the SAC approach to teaching and learning, we try to develop situations in which students and teachers interchange roles. The students do not arrive in our classes knowing nothing. So it is important that teachers also write and discuss their essays, poems, movies, and other compositions with students. About a dozen of the writings in this collection are by teachers. In every case, the writings were developed, read, discussed, and revised during workshops in which students and teachers participated together as part of professional development and school improvement at the three schools and at workshops hosted by United Teachers of New Orleans and presented in collaboration with Students at the Center.
Another important part of the social setting that produced the writings in *Men We Love, Men We Hate* is the academic work in which the writings were developed. Students and teachers write in response to and as a way of entering dialogue about a range of course materials, including autobiographical writings by Richard Wright, Andrew X. Pham, James Baldwin, bell hooks, Andrew Lam, John Edgar Wideman, and Virginia Woolf; essays by Carol Gilligan, George Orwell, and Rebecca Walker; plays and fiction by William Shakespeare, Edwidge Danticat, Arthur Miller, and Bessie Head. As our students examine these class readings, they refer to the writings they have produced from their own knowledge and experience to help them understand better the academic work and to use it as part of the dialogue to improve their own writing.

In the Students at the Center community, students and teachers have been developing this material for over ten years. The writings straddle the human-made catastrophe that followed Hurricane Katrina, spanning from 1997 to 2009. During that time we have many friends, supporters, and organizations who have made this body of work possible.

Funding for the settings that created this work and/or for the printing of this book has come from numerous sources over the years, including Algebra Project through National Science Foundation grant in partnership with Students at the Center, Algiers/Bywater Weed and Seed, The ASC Foundation, Baptist Community Ministries, the Ford Foundation, the Hazen Foundation, Middlebury College, Open Society Institute, Spencer Foundation, Time-Warner Foundation, U. S. Department of Education’s 21st Century Community Learning Centers and Smaller Learning Community programs, UrbanHeart Community Learning Centers, and What Kids Can Do.

In the education world, the New Orleans Public Schools and particularly three high schools—Frederick Douglass, McDonogh 35, and McMain—and their students, parents, and staff have helped create the climate through which our students and classes could thrive and the careful thinking represented here could emerge. United Teachers of New Orleans (American Federation of Teachers Local 527) has been a key partner directly in hosting workshops and training teachers and indirectly in creating a climate in which public school teachers can feel safe and valued to voice and act on what they know best about providing quality education to all students.
Write to Change, Andover Bread Loaf Writing Workshop, and the Bread Loaf Graduate School of English (directed respectively by our dear friends Dixie Goswami, Lou Bernieri, and Jim Maddox) have trained our teachers, taught courses about us using our materials, and provided professional and emotional support amid attacks both locally and nationally on public education systems that helped us produce this collection of writings. Community Book Center has always provided a home for SAC community workshops and an audience for our young writers: thank you Mama Jennifer Turner and Mama Vera Warren-Williams. Crescent City Peace Alliance and the Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies have both served as fiscal agents and programming partners in the early years of SAC. More recently The Renaissance Project and its executive director, Greta Gladney, have provided much more than fiscal sponsorship and administrative support; they have stood shoulder to shoulder with us in ensuring that youth in New Orleans have a safe space to explore their lives and share their views.

Jim Randels
INTRODUCTION

I thought I was already familiar with this story. And to an extent I am—father absence, fallen heroes, failure, disappointment—all of it is here and all of it partakes of a grand narrative of suffering and survivability. But this manuscript is edged in something else, something akin to a “soft heart in sandpaper wearing down.” That line is from Sadiq Watson’s piece about his doting grandfather, a beloved figure who was also an abusive father and husband. Sadiq’s essay is just one attempt to process the confusion that comes with loving with difficulty.

This book is pregnant with love, but it is a love overburdened by secrets, disappointments, repression, confrontation, accusations, forgiveness, and loss. As I read these stories, I am reminded of how close pathos and comedy lie. Here are fathers with rap sheets full of “some of the stupidest shit a person can do”; brothers who rob Chicken in the Boxes only to be smoked out of their rabbit-holes by snipers and sharpshooters; and one, beautiful, tragic “tenth grade hero of the third floor” who promised to make his teacher cry and delivered—all of them filled with a dark humor both absurd and pathological.

These (his)tories, so generously shared and courageously confronted, ring with an authenticity that is almost too much to bear. I am smiling as I come across the familiar figures of my own New Orleans childhood. The characters are different, but the lines and cues are the same: “Miss Diane the Candy Lady” and the boys with the “chee-wees” in their hair; stealing away to the Lake for a kiss or walking through the 3rd ward in plaid uniform pants and hoping for the best. The tidiness of the bildungsroman is lacking here; no simple coming-of-age narrative, the stories here are very much an account of a process of becoming—and also a eulogy for life possibilities that have sometimes, quite literally, been shot down. But that irony shouldn’t be surprising. In New Orleans we laugh when we cry and we dance when we are hurting. Second-line people, even our guns are carnivalesque.

The students in this book wrestle with terrifically nuanced situations with a measure of self-reflection that is astounding in its honesty and maturity. More than once we read about frustrated efforts to “un-become” like the male figures who have “failed at their job of loving,
caring, cherishing, and appreciating,” raising an important question about how much choice we really have in the people we turn out to be. Ashley Jones contributes an important piece on survivor’s guilt with “Reckless Endangerment,” reminding us that these students, like the rest of the Katrina diaspora, are still trying to survive that storm. Just how much that storm has contributed to the pain saturating these stories is the work of a much longer project.

For the first time, SAC teachers, as well as SAC students present pieces alongside one another. This is an important evolution of the SAC process because it forcefully manifests one of the founding tenets of the SAC program: students can be teachers too. And what stories they have shared! Whether mourning the death of a student, a friend, or a capacity to be loved, these teachers reveal that they don’t know the answers either and that is a courageous thing to admit to students already skinned raw by uncertainty.

“Start with what you know to learn what you don’t know. Start with where you’re at to get to where you want to go.” Again and again the stories in this book show us just how much students already know about life, the hardness of loving, and the ferocity of memory. Together, their collective voice reminds us of the narrow window we have to live it well so that our children and grandchildren don’t have to pick up the pieces.

Adrinda Kelly

_In Fall of 1997, Adrinda Kelly enrolled in the first full year of SAC classes at McDonogh 35 High School. She has continued to work with SAC while she has pursued a career as an editor and historian._
FATHERS AND CHILDREN
When I was younger, I remember loving my father and appreciating him for being in my life. I still love him at times and appreciate him, but I also do not like him at times. My father worked offshore for two weeks and was home for a week. The week he was home was like heaven. We would have pizza, crawfish, and crabs. When we went to the store, he would say my favorite words, “get anything you want chicky.” Then we might go to the movies or rent a movie to watch together. He helped me with my homework and creased my clothes for two weeks. He even gave me twenty dollars every two weeks.

That was the time I would tell my daddy anything, but now it’s different. I have limited conversations that often involve money. There are times when I feel bad, because I seem to treat him like an ATM machine. Sometimes I wish things were like old times, but they are not. As I have grown older, I notice characteristics of my father that I used to overlook because I was ignorant of society. One characteristic is his constant criticism of my mother’s weight. Another is his over indulgence in alcohol that caused him to overlook needed things. His alcohol is indeed the main reason I frown upon him.

My grandfather often said, “An alcoholic is not someone who drinks often but someone who lets alcohol take over his life.” See my grandfather always got a little tipsy with a pint of Crown Royal every day, and my grandmother hated it. She used to say he was the reason her youngest son was so bad, because his father was an alcoholic. Although my grandfather drank, he still worked and took care of his family financially and mentally. A few years ago, my grandfather brought his statement to life when he took ill with a sickness that made him unable to drink any more. The day the doctor told him his alcohol was causing his sickness, he quit and has not had a drink since then.

My grandfather was able to quit. However, my father has not. He is a prime example of someone who has let alcohol take over his life. Since my mother and father separated, he continues to drink. At one time, he even blamed my mother for his actions, because he was not man enough to accept his consequences. I used to ignore him and say he was going through an early mid-life crisis.
A few weeks ago, I had a serious conversation with my father about the black society as a whole. We discussed one of my favorite rappers, Kanye West, and how he sings about politics and the conscience of black people, how we tend to worry about material things and discontinue our education to achieve money fast. The last discussion my dad and I had was about my previous class discussion. The discussion was about how blacks talk about what we need to do, but when it is time to do something, we cannot.

This conversation was weird, because only a few years ago my daddy cared about material things. Only a few years ago partying was all he cared about; a steady job was not even a question in his mind. However, now he has a real steady job and attempts to give me forty dollars a week. The conversation showed me that maybe he is leaving his mid-life crisis and is ready to accept his responsibility. After the conversation, he told me he was sorry that he had not been doing right by me and promised me he would. I do not know if he was serious, but I still respect his effort to try.
DADDY’S LITTLE GIRL
Calibriell Williams, McMain Secondary School

As I fix my rear view mirror, I see myself in the driver’s seat when I was nine years old. I sat upon your scrawny thigh covered by your dirt-stained navy blue pants. I struggled to see over the driving wheel.

Now the day has come when I’m flat on the car seat driving on my own. Oh, how I miss you guiding me like the stars in the night.

“Daddy, higher! I can’t see over the wheel,” I would constantly say. Placing my hand on the wheel like I was the only person in the driver’s seat, I began turning the wheel left and right.

I observed the other Louisiana license plate vehicles surrounding me. Someone blew their horn. “Hey, the light is green!” I rapidly pulled off.

“Daddy, look! I’m driving! I’m doing it on my own!” I energetically said, not knowing that your ashy legs were steering the wheel at the bottom. “Beep, beep! C’mon, y’all, move out my way,” I yelled as the cars stopped at the red light.

Slightly pressing upon my breaks to let the Indiana license plate car slip in, I smiled. I smiled, because I knew that you were there with me.

As we arrived at the airport, I saw my mamma. You strolled silently to your gate to depart for Indiana. “Daddy, wait!” I screamed, to get your attention. You stopped. As I rapidly ran into your arms, you whispered, “Daddy’s little girl.”
I can still see the sores, scrapes, and bruises on his big black hands, the big puffed calluses on his palm from a long day’s work.

My dad, Ivory Turner, was born in Clayton, Louisiana. At the age of four he started picking cotton in the cotton field. A four-year-old could not pick cotton alone. He would stand between his mother and grandmother, picking the treasured fiber and putting it in both of their big potato sacks. He worked in the field from five in the morning until one in the evening, for three dollars a day.

Today, we pass these fields each time we go to Clayton. We visit my grandfather there regularly. The road that leads to Clayton is Highway 15: a lonely four-lane highway lined with soybean fields in neat rows. There’s not a time when we drive by that my dad does not point at the acres of white harvested cotton, which he had once picked. As we pass by, I try to imagine myself working in the fields, but I cannot. I imagine my dad, willing but not wanting to work in these fields. He hated it, but it was something he had to do.

Working in the field had a big impact on my dad’s life. It built character and perseverance, but most of all it taught him how to work. He is now passing on all of these qualities to my sister and me. He is a self-employed gardener. He works part of the winter and all summer long.

One summer morning around eight o’clock, I was in my room watching cartoons. My sister was at my aunt’s baby-sitting, and my mom was in her office working. My dad saw me lying in bed and figured I wasn’t busy. He asked me to help him out cutting grass. I said, “sure,” thinking it would be a breeze.

I came home that evening aching with pain. I told my dad I would never cut grass again, because it was too much hard work.

He replied with what someone once told him, “Gabe, let me see your hands.” He rubbed across my palms feeling for calluses. I had none. “You never worked a hard day in your life.”
He showed me his hand. “This is hard work.” He showed me the thick, hard, ugly calluses from hauling hay and working in a sawmill as a teenager.

I thought about what he told me. I decided to give cutting grass another chance. I’ve been cutting grass for four years now.

Working with my dad is a great experience. Not only do I learn how to work. I also have a chance to really get to know my dad and spend time with him.

My dad is not much of a talker, and working with him gives me the opportunity to see him and be with him. We don’t just work. We eat lunch together every workday, and we sit down and have conversations with some of his customers.

Cutting grass has had a great impact on my life. Just like picking cotton taught my dad how to work, cutting grass has taught me how to work. I have the calluses to prove it.
DADDY
Kewina Trim, Frederick Douglass High School

Daddy, why you had to leave me so early?
Why you couldn't stay and watch me grow up?
Daddy, why when you were living you weren't there for me?
Is it that you were too caught up to worry about your baby girl?
Or is it that the drugs you were on took you away from me?
I don't know, but I would like to find out.
Daddy I have a question for you.
Did you ever do anything for me?
Besides giving me my life, and I thank you for that.
That’s the best thing you ever did for me.
Daddy, why you couldn’t be here when I got my first boyfriend? Why?
I wanted to see your reaction.
I want to know what you would say.
Would you let me go by his house or would you let him come over?
Daddy, why you couldn’t be here when I got my period?
I know you're a man, but I wanted you and mama to be there.
I wanted you to see your baby girl growing up, becoming a young lady.
Too bad. I'm there now.
Daddy, why you couldn’t be there when I broke my virgin? Why?
I wanted to ask you questions, but instead I talked to no one.
I kept it all inside, and it’s still there, but I'm finding out the answers day by day.
Daddy, why you couldn’t be there the day I make you and mama proud?
My Graduation Day! Why?
Daddy I have another question for you.
Can you promise me you’ll be there?
Promise me you and God will watch from heaven.
Watching me walk across the stage.
Promise.
Please promise me.
MAKE-UP CALL
April Vincent, Frederick Douglass High School

I was four inches taller with a whole new face. My hair was longer, and I had no choice but to walk with a switch. The heels could not help me reach the cups that were high up on the shelf. I was pretending to be a movie star, which was my dad’s nickname for me, and I got thirsty. I was eleven years old, and I would always pretend that I was someone more glamorous than myself.

One day I would pretend I was a lawyer defending a client in the courtroom. The next day I would be one of those supermodels “ripping the runway.” It didn’t really matter who I was. I guess I always played dress up to escape reality.

One day I was pretending to be a singer, and I had on all this make up that I had been playing with. Of course I looked like a clown, but it was all a part of me changing my identity.

My dad walked in the house for one of his weekly visits, asking, “where’s Movie Star?” I was not ecstatic, but I guess I was glad to see him there.

He looked confused when he saw my face and asked, “where is that beautiful mole that used to be over your lip?” I laughed and told him it was still there. He told me to “take that make-up off your face, put some good clothes on and go outside.”

When I went outside, I was feeling fine, but I was myself again. I wanted to be like those people I saw on TV who had fame, beautiful long hair, fancy clothes and nice cars.

My dad came outside to talk to me. He told me that it was alright to want to be famous and glamorous but not to get caught up in trying so hard to be someone else that you lose sight of who you are.

I thought about what he said, and I took that into consideration. As a matter of fact I took what he said, and I applied it. I stopped wearing make-up for a while. I realized how beautiful I was, and there was really no need to “Make-up” who I am or try to be someone I’m not. But it was still fun to imagine that I was Beyoncé, Alicia Keys, or Tyra Banks.
DADDY WAS MY TWO IN ONE
Demetria White, Students at the Center Staff

As a child my daddy was everything I needed him to be. He was the disciplinarian, but still he managed to be the nurturer. He was the teacher, while being the listener. He was boss and still playmate. My daddy was the perfect set of parents. He was the total package, both mother and father. Daddy was everything I envisioned a mother to be and met all the criteria needed to be crowned world’s greatest dad. He was perfect, but he lacked an important feature. He was missing the necessary qualities to be deemed a woman. When it was time for those mother-daughter brunches, daddy couldn’t come. Yeah he was my mother, but he wasn’t the typical mother. He didn’t wear red lipstick and dresses or, even, carry Kleenex and peppermints in his purse. When puberty hit, daddy couldn’t tell me how unbearable the cramps could get or even the best pads to buy. Daddy couldn’t because daddy was a man. At these times, I needed a woman, and daddy didn’t fit the bill, by biology or by social development.

It was about six years after my mother’s death when daddy decided to bring a woman into our world. I was secretly excited to have some woman authority in the house, a little estrogen to fill that empty space. With her around, I would have someone’s nails to paint and not just have mine painted or even have to paint my own. I was ready to have a mommy again and not have to look at my older sisters as mother figures. Even though I could go to daddy with anything, I wanted to have that tug-of-war experience, to be caught in the middle of two different opinions on one issue. I was anxious to see how her perspective differed from daddy’s. I was eager to be turned down by one parent and run to the other with tear-stained eyes and be graciously accepted. I was ready for the task of physically having two parents. I was ready, but she was not ready for me.

Usually before two people unite in holy matrimony, they find out all the basics about their partner. They’re introduced to their partner’s family, downfalls, and successes. So, they have a pretty solid idea of what they are going to face. Likewise, when this woman decided to say “I do” to my daddy, she said “I do” to his family, his downfalls, and his successes. However, when she did this, she didn’t realize the pact
she had signed with me. She knew my daddy had four girls at home whom she had to play mommy to, even if she didn’t want to. Honestly, she didn’t have to take on all four girls because my older sisters were of age. It was just me, a 10-year-old, mother-seeking girl. I really wasn’t asking for much. I just needed her to be the best mother she knew how to be. She had already had experience with this because she had two children of her own. I wanted her to treat me like she treated them. I wanted to tag along, when she and her daughter went to the mall, but I was never invited. I wanted her to check my homework and be a supportive parent at my cheerleading games, the same way she did with her son, but she never did. For the last eight years I have been cheering, and she hasn’t made it to any of my games or competitions, not one. When it was time to go shopping for prom dresses and all my friends were shopping with their mothers, I wanted her to at least offer to come, but she never said a word. She wasn’t even there to help me get dressed. When my sisters couldn’t step up to curl my hair for my sixth grade graduation or help me find that perfect outfit for my first date, she should have been there, but she wasn’t. She just faded in the background and remained there.

After all these years of playing and staying in the background she is finally trying to come out and seek my attention: the attention I once wholeheartedly offered her. But now it’s too late. I’m no longer that 10-year-old, mother-seeking girl who wanted some validation from a woman to show her she was growing up to be a nice little lady. All the while she wasn’t fulfilling that mommy role, daddy stayed the part. He continued to be the disciplinarian, nurturer, teacher, listener, boss and playmate I needed. Daddy was the shopping buddy, supportive parent, prom dress picker, nail polisher and beautician. Daddy was my everything before the woman came and remained my everything while she was there. I now realize that I didn’t need a woman to rear me into a young lady; daddy did a perfect job. I didn’t even need a woman to call mommy: daddy was my two in one, both mommy and daddy. Even though daddy didn’t wear red lipstick and wasn’t the typical mother, he is the best mother I’ve ever had, hands down.
When I was one year old, my mom passed away. She was twenty years old and died from walking pneumonia. When I was about three and a half, my dad got out of jail and took care of my whole family. My dad took care of my big sister too, even though she was not his child. As the years went by, I grew wiser, smarter, and more mature. But a big piece of my life was missing.

When I reached six years old, I started to realize what was missing: I only had one parent. In my eyes, my dad took the place of both mother and father. Then I noticed my cousin had both parents, but they were just separated. My cousin also looked up to his dad, my uncle, as both parental figures. At the age of ten my cousin and I witnessed his father’s death at the hands of two gunmen. When I was twelve, my grandmother showed me a video recording of my cousin and me as babies. When I was watching the video, I saw what it looked like to have both of my parents. I saw when they were teaching me how to walk, playing around with me, and feeding me. From that moment my mind started to wonder if I was older during the making of the video would I be the same.

When I ask about my mom, people tell me she was an angel because of how nice and beautiful of a person she was. I wish I could know these things without having to ask others. As a teen I still wonder how my life would have been and what it would feel like to have my mom growing up.
My Sister, My Father, Our Family, Our Future

Christina Ruffins, McDonogh 35 High School

“I LUV U 2” by my sister, Neisha

Hey stranger, yea man I’m talking 2 you! I don’t even know where 2 start but just know I’m talking 2 you! I wanna thank you 4 everything that you do. Which is not much at all, that’s why I’m talking 2 you. And if you still don’t know who I’m talking 2, hey stranger, I mean daddy, now do you have a clue? I do. I remember every time that I stuck up 4 u. Because I don’t understand why my momma hated you. I remember when you took us bike riding on the levee. And chrissy rolled down the hill and den she tried 2 dare me. And when I didn’t go yall both called me scary. You tried 2 teach me how 2 cartwheel but I thought I was too heavy. Yeah, those days were fun. But now those days are done. And I keep saying “those days” but it’s only just that one. Other than that, I can’t remember none. I remember you snuck me cause I woke you and told you I was hungry and now it’s not just my stomach that is lonely. One day when I was kinda still a baby, but I was old enough 2 know that that day wasn’t all gravy. Cause just all out the blue, you and mommy started acting crazy. She was throwing shit at you and you was telling her 2 stop. And you was breakin all the phones so she wouldn’t call the cops. There was a lot of bad things that I heard you both say. But you said something that stood out more than anything that day. “Bye yall I ain’t never comin back” is what you said with a smile. And I was staring right at you the whole while. “I ain’t never comin back” is exactly whatchu said. And that scene keep fuckin playin back in my head. I still remember you pullin off in that truck that was red. “I ain’t never comin back” is what you had said. “Bye yall, I ain’t never comin back” is what I heard. And that’s the only time you ever was a man of yo word. And that’s a matter of fact. And everything was different after that. Was it because mommy was getting fat? Or is it true that your home was wherever you laid your hat? Yeah, I heard you had them hoes in different area codes and you was takin em shoppin and buyin em clothes. What’s up with that “dad?” I thought we was...
the best thing you ever had? And I remember the first time we really made you mad. When you gave me piano lessons, and the first time I tried it, you was so excited. Then I quit and you was pissed but you tried your best to hide it. I remember when you first let me on stage to sing. I thought that was just the best thing. You was so proud you ain’t know what 2 do. And I taught myself 2 play piano better so you could be proud of that 2! And when you first let me on stage 2 sing the blues! You almost passed out when I made the front page of the news! But little did I know I was only being used. You got all the glory while those people were amused. They got me on tape saying that your footsteps I would follow. But later on in life you did something that was hard for me to swallow. It all started when I got a gig at the famous “Apollo.” I was singing there and I hit a note that was real high and people started clapping, even started to cry. Then, all of a sudden you started playing real loud. I couldn’t hear myself cause you was so loud. I just stopped singing lookin 4 my momma in the crowd. But I went ahead and let you do yo thing. Even though the lady called in the first place cause she wanted ME to sing. You already had yo fame, yo wealth, and yo bling. And she wrote me a check for 400 dollars. But I never got it, maybe it was both of ours. It probably went to your new fiancée who got about a thousand flowers. But she was getting fat. I thought u would leave her like mommy. It turned out to be a whole little sister right behind me. In my first year of high school, u did something that really wasn’t cool. I mean this shit just really wasn’t right. This was the shit that really made me want to fight. This boy, he used to stare and I just thought he liked me. But it started getting scary man it really started to fright me. He told my best friend that he was my brother. I said he was trippin’ we aint have the same mother. He said to go and ask that man I called “dad.” Come to fine out, we aint the only kids you had. And that’s the thing that made me really mad. Because you lied about it and u aint even feel bad. And that shit is just sad. What kind of man are you “dad”? I thought you was giving us the life you never had. Well congradu-fucking-lations cause you always had your dad. And the reason why I’m sitting here writing this rhyme is cause I suddenly had this feeling of love and hate at the same time. Sometimes I get this feeling that makes me really want to fight you. Because it makes me think my momma hates me just for looking exactly like you. Yeah daddy you really make me feel played when I think about how it would have been if you would have stayed. Well dad it didn’t kill me, so I guess
it’ll make me stronger. But I can’t hold back my feelings any longer. So since I didn’t die, I guess I’m gonna cry but what I’m not gonna do is keep on letting you slide. I’m not any more gonna listen to you lie. So since you only say you love me with your mouth, I don’t ever want you to shout. Just swallow that love daddy and all your pride. And hopefully that love will take a ride. I just pray its next stop is at another body part. Just make sure that love takes a stop at your heart.

— Neshia Ruffins 12.30.08

As my sister finished reading her piece to me, I could feel the lump in my throat slowly rise like magma in a volcano. I may have been smiling, but the tears and boogers and snot ran down my face furiously. She spoke the truth: pure, unadulterated, sheer truth. And it hurt like hell. I was smiling though, because I had never seen this side of her before. This moment brought us together more through her giving me an invitation to her more intimate side — a side we typically kept separate as sisters; I was accustomed to showing my emotions only to myself and was typically unaware of hers, other than when she was angered or frightened. Somehow I could feel our emotions sort of hovering and merging together in the atmosphere. We felt sick, angry, hurt, and helpless all at once, and all we could do was smile and cry profusely.

That is when I discovered that we shared a problem—not only with each other, but with the innumerable young girls in the world who have had to grow up without the constant presence of their fathers. All we have are our mothers and a vision of how life “should” be — with a father and a mother in the same household. Mother would be there to cope with the emotional distress that comes along with the territory of becoming a young woman, while father would be available to give advice with practical matters like easing tension between his daughter and her male associates. We didn’t have that. We dreamed of that life, but we didn’t have that. What we had was a single mother, who was already trying to process her own psychological distress caused from missing a spouse, forced to raise her daughters without the benefits of a complete household.

I don’t know what exactly went wrong with my parents’ relationship; neither do I want to know. I do, however, believe that it could have been prevented or resolved even. In my mind, I believe it’s going to
be primarily my responsibility in my relationship to hold everything together. I think the wife should respect her husband, since she has already vowed to be with him for her life, and in return, he should do the same. They should struggle together to solve the problems that occur, and nothing should be strong enough to destroy their bond, a bond that must have been prominent at one point and urged them to get married in the first place. I believe that husband and wife have a mutual agreement to be the betterment of each other: sort of like a “you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours” relationship. That is just the way I see things. And I think that if our parents, my sister and I, and the other girls like us had this mentality, single-parenthood wouldn’t be an issue and would virtually vanish.
I don’t hate my father. I’m just upset with him. I wouldn’t say I hate him, because that would be too evil. But I really don’t think it’s serious to say that I hate him. After all, he has been missing for almost all my years that I went through and is still missing as we speak. I am very upset with him.

My dad has been gone or not part of my life since I came to New Orleans, Louisiana. When I was first born, we were living in California with him. He stayed around until I was probably about nine months old. Then he went to jail. After that my mom and I moved to New Orleans to visit some family members. We then found out that he was going to be in jail for a while, so we decided to stay in New Orleans. He didn’t last long at all to even see us leave.

I am very upset with my father, because he was not around to see the first step I took. He was not even around to see me stop drinking out of bottles. My dad wasn’t around long enough to teach me how to say dad as my first word or to even teach me to be potty trained. He missed out on a lot of things. He should be very disappointed.

Ever since I left California and my dad has been out of jail, I saw him once. I saw him when he came to New Orleans to visit us. He brought back lots of toys to try to make up for the years he hadn’t been around. When I grew older and started knowing more, I learned that the toys he gave didn’t make up for the years he was missing. He should be ashamed of himself.

When I think about a father or my father, I think about my mom. My mother is both of my parents. She’s my mom and my dad. She does everything a mom should do and everything a dad should do. She takes care of me. She teaches me right from wrong. She helps me even when I’m down. She also teaches me to respect everyone, no matter who they are.
It was Christmas morning, and I sprang from the bed in a hurry eager to see all the nice gifts that I had gotten from my folks. I ran into my tiled bathroom and reached into my Sponge Bob cup holder and pulled out my blue and white toothbrush and loaded it with Colgate Total toothpaste. I began brushing away. Once done brushing my teeth I went into the living room.

The Christmas lights blinded me as I approached our eight-foot real tree. I saw a big box addressed to me from my mom. I was excited, because the box was so big. I sat on the sofa and opened the box. It was a sewing kit. I always wanted a sewing kit ever since the age of eight, when I became interested in fashion. The sewing machine was gorgeous. It had silver and white paint on the edges of the thimble. I began searching for my mom to thank her for such a spectacular gift.

I searched the whole house but had no luck finding her. I went into her room, but she wasn’t there. I went into the kitchen, but she wasn’t there. Lastly, I checked the bathroom, and she wasn’t there. I went onto the balcony hoping she was there, but she wasn’t. Where was she? I heard voices as I turned to go inside. I crept downstairs quietly and saw that it was my mom conversing with some strange man whom I’d never seen before. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, because they were whispering. But I read their faces. She was definitely angry, and he was looking as if he was feeling remorse. “Who is this man? And what does he want with my mother?” was all I could whisper as I watched intensively as the two chatted away. He reached into his pocket, pulling out a red envelope that had the names of Adrian and Andrew Reaves on it. I found it creepy. My mom tried to hand it back to him, but he refused to take it back. He walked down the stairs and began to leave. My mom sighed and made her way back up the stairs.

I ran back inside and sat on the sofa, pretending that I had been there the whole time. I smiled and giggled, trying to make my façade seem real. I went over to her and thanked her for the sewing machine. She smiled vaguely and headed to her room.
My mom stood by her hand-carved dresser and opened the drawer, into which she prepared to place the envelope. I peeped and saw her try to put the envelope under her red tights, but I couldn’t let that happen. I made a bold move, saying, “momma thank you really for the gift.” I reached in for a hug, causing her to drop the red envelope onto the floor. I went in for it, picking it up. She tried to take it from me, but I wouldn’t let her. I opened it. I could see my mother become frustrated as she scratched her forehead. I saw all the money inside the envelope. It had to have like three one hundred dollar bills and a certain amount of twenty dollar bills. I was baffled, so I asked, “Momma where did you get this money from?” I hoped she would be honest enough to tell me the truth. She replied, “I’ve been saving some money in case of emergency.” That was it! I had to confront her. I told her that I saw the mysterious man in the hall. She was really lost for words and looked guilty. She said, “Drew mind your own damn business. I am a grown woman.” I was about to walk off when she said, “Andy don’t tell anybody, but that man is your and Adrian’s daddy.”

“Not this again” was all I could think. I was doing fine with Joe not being my daddy. As far as I was concerned I didn’t have a daddy. I was speechless after hearing the news. It was like a wave of drama had washed clean over me. These feelings were unexplainable. I didn’t know how to react as I stood there like a mute trying to find something in my scrambled brain to say. Nothing came. My mom said, “Don’t worry. I told him to stay away, because I knew you wouldn’t want to see him.” I stopped her stupid ranting and out of the blue said, “call him. I want to see him. I have a few things to tell his lying, child-abandoning ass.”

My mom didn’t even try to stop me. I guessed she realized that it was bound to happen. She knew that I wouldn’t listen to anything she had to say. I folded my arms selfishly and exited the room, leaving my mom to ponder in her thoughts.

A knock occurred the following day, and I knew it had to be him because none of my family would ever consider knocking on the door. They didn’t have that much class. I knew it had to be my dad, judging from the look on my mom’s face; the anguish and the depression gave me sure sign that it was indeed my father. I peeped from my room to see if he had come inside. He was there wearing his long black casual pants with a white, low-cut, dress shirt. I was ready to make my soap opera entrance. I looked in the mirror practicing all these scolding faces
I was going to give him as he fed me those bogus excuses about why he couldn’t come forth and claim me.

I heard my mom whispering something to him, and I saw a look of nervousness flash across his face. I knew right then and there it was time for my entrance. I walked into the living room all cool, calm, and collected, squinting my eyes a little to give myself a more pissed off look. He looked at me as if he was looking at a reflection of himself. He came toward me, and I moved back. I found myself lost for words as I got closer to him. I started to melt right there on the floor. I was so intrigued by the way he was dressed that I found myself wanting to know more about him. My mom started a blank conversation between us. She brought up the fact that I was an honor student. That really got his attention. I found myself letting go of my inhibitions and having a great time. He maybe wasn’t the perfect father, but at least he was trying to make a strong effort, and I do congratulate him for that.

Everything was going swell as I saw a little of me in him, and I was definitely happy about that. He was a well-accomplished man who worked at Charity Hospital as a radiologist. I was always interested in the medical field. While in the middle of this good conversation he reached into his pocket and pulled out a black Louie Vutton wallet and a bunch of his pictures. He handed them to me. It was a bunch of pictures of him or at least that’s what I assumed. He said “these are some of the pictures of your little brother, whose name is also Andrew.” That sealed the deal. How could he raise another son when he didn’t care for me or my brother? Seeing those pictures angered me, and I wanted—no, no had to—confront him. I tried to maintain my composure as he went on bragging about how Tyrone was a smart kid. Listening to him defend his other son only added fuel to the fire.

All of this music that was playing in my head stopped, and I stepped back into reality and realized that I have a father who wasn’t there for me but there for another child. I removed myself form the sofa where we sat and tried to make an escape to the kitchen for some anger management, because I knew I was about to let his ass have it. My mom told me to sit down and to continue to get to know big Andrew. I couldn’t believe it. I had that Negro’s name. I looked at my mom with disgrace as I pretended to be interested in hearing about his wife Melissa. I bowed my head, trying to find my safe place, but then it all exploded the minute he invited me to go fishing with him. It wasn’t the fact that he asked me but the principle that he asked as if he’d known me for a long time. I looked at him and began to walk off.
This was officially it. I decided to cut the drama short, because this was too much drama even for me. I said “I really enjoyed your company, but it’s time for you to leave.” His face dropped as I continued to rip into him. I accused him of abandoning me and for the whole unrevealing of Joe not being my real father. I cussed at him and told him that I still didn’t have a father. Big Andrew was lost for words, and he looked lost in translation. I was really through. I dismissed myself but not before I told him he was better off dead. I left that living room tense and in a fury, but I realized I put myself before me and did what I thought was best for me and that was eliminating all the drama that centered my life. As of today my relationship with big Andrew is over. He died two years ago, and before he did he didn’t call or ever come back over, and it didn’t bother me the least bit.
I love my father and my brother. The respect I have for them both goes beyond what I can say. They encourage me every day to want to be a strong, successful woman and as a result receive a strong black male like them. I love them so much, because they came from negative environments but had the strength to make a change. They have legitimate jobs, and they love their families.

I was conceived in New Orleans’ third ward during one of the worst times in my family’s history. My father was on drugs, and my mother already had four children for him, so having me was even harder for her. My father had always been a quiet and giving man, but being on drugs showed my mother another side of him.

My mother, on the other hand, had known and loved this drug addict since they were thirteen and had never imagined her life would become that way. Though she never feared him, she feared what his life would be like without a family or strong woman to hold him down. She figured that marriage was about sticking together, and if she couldn’t be around when he was down and out, then there was really no use for her. My father always loved and cherished his family, so on the day I was born he got off drugs. To this day he calls me his savior.

I love my brother so much, because he is the epitome of what a black man should be. He was an innocent little kid stuck in an environment so vicious that he had no choice but to be its product. Eventually the things he never imagined himself doing turned into his new-found lifestyle. He began to deal the same drugs that my father had dealt with for most of my brother’s life. He slept with many women, went to jail a lot, and ran with all the wrong people, until he eventually realized that life is not how you make it but all the more in how you take it that makes you who you are. This is what encouraged him to go back to school and make a difference in his life.

Both my father and my brother had enough courage to see something negative in their lives and make a change. When I talk to them, I imagine talking to Malcolm X or Tupac, because their perspective on life is unlike any other men I know. The way my father talks about his
life as if he lived it just yesterday and the way my brother glorifies his hard times as if it were something that he wouldn’t trade for the world all the more make me proud to see that they have changed their lives around. I don’t think that because you were raised in a horrible society that you are damaged or can’t deal. The men of my life show me this every day. This is why I love them so.
LOVE VS. DIGNITY
Thao Nguyen, McMain Secondary School

Have you ever realized that fictional characters are the key answer to the reality of your life? This might sound exaggerated, but yet it’s true. One of the biggest answers that’s so true I received so far is from Beloved in Toni Morrison’s book of the same name.

Different in person, life, timeline, and opportunity make it a perfect comparison between the two of us. Beloved’s life can’t be compared any better than as a light blanket of fog. When you treasure her life, it helps you. If you don’t treasure it, there’s only fog that anyone can step or go through as if it doesn’t exist. Beloved died young, and unfortunately her life ended not by anyone else but her own mother, Sethe. To Beloved her mom is an evil lady who can never be able to afford to give her a life of freedom and happiness and even worse she cut her own daughter’s throat. The opposite of Beloved, I have nothing to hate but yet I’m selfish.

I’m a lucky child, and I can have most of everything I want at hand. I’m well educated and well raised from the love of my parents. From books, family teachings, and school I have come to know about the existence of the two priceless treasures that every single human sustains—it’s the body itself and self-dignity.

My dad knows it well, not as an expert but as a professional. He knows how to keep the brightness of his treasures shining without having to polish them every day. Through a faithful marriage his body represents a model treasure to the eyes of every husband. Living a good life, using the knowledge and honorable intentions as a compass has led him into success in his career and family. My dad is proud. He is proud of the achievements he has in education and work. Everything is important to him—learning, working, playing, and singing—but all will be put beneath his dignity. Nothing can outshine his dignity. So much of what you can call the perfect father makes me a lucky child. I admire my dad for his keeping-it-perfect skill. But who would have thought that because of “love” he would be willing to give up his dignity for the better tomorrow of his family.
Having graduated from one of the best colleges in Vietnam, my dad registered to work in a car company that paid a high monthly salary. Not everybody can apply for this job. He or she must meet a certain level of knowledge, and English is one of the top requirements. My dad had them all. The money he received was more than just enough, so my mom didn’t need to dirty her hands with work. It was a perfect life for me, my mom, and of course the whole family.

A few years later, when we stepped our feet in a big land called America is when our life changed. The change in me was big, but as my eyes turned to my dad I came to think that “mine ain’t big at all.” My dad still had an inside job but not in an office but a nail salon, a place where the brain doesn’t have to work as hard as the hands. It’s an easy job that anyone can get all the learning they need to know in just months. There’s nothing that you can call difficult in doing the job, but for a man it’s a whole big challenge. The challenge is to be able to let down his dignity at any point so no feeling can explode when holding the dirty toes and hands of the customers as if they’re your master. It was hard for my dad. He tried and tried several times to accept the fact that he was now no longer the “he” he used to be. The same amount of money or even more still flowed into his pocket, but an unpleasantness did he feel. He no longer used money to help people as freely as he did before back then. He’s wrestling here and there so much that it’s hard for me to deny the fact that he loves me and our family.

Beloved can’t write as much as I can when it comes to love as the topic. I’m happy because I can keep on praising my father for the rest of my life. I’m proud because I have a dad who keeps on loving me continuously.

To me a hero doesn’t need any kind of super power in order to put people in awe; a natural power can work well too. My dad is a real hero, a hero whose dictionary doesn’t allow the existence of the word “give up.” Am I right for having so much pride in my dad for his sacrifice or should I be ashamed of him? Ashamed of having a dad who can not give me the America cool-look every time I face my friends? No, of course not. What’s there to be ashamed of? I have received so much before and even now, so a little less won’t hurt me a bit. I should stop being selfish and be pleased with the luck I’ve been given. Beloved had a reason to hate her mother, but I don’t. This is the answer I discovered and which I believe will lead my life in going to the right direction. John Barrymore once said “happiness often sneaks in through a door you didn’t know you left open,” and this quote suggests that people should acknowledge their luck more.
ACCEPTING REALITY
Amelia Hernandez, Frederick Douglass High School

I’m chillin. I’m 14. I’m cute. I’m a dime. He noticed me. Yeah I’m bucked up. Ah yeah, he’s cute. He’s goofy, a lil crazy but all mine. It’s all good because it doesn’t get any better than this. It doesn’t get any more realistic than us. It’s all real; it isn’t puppy love. Yeah I’m Ms. Sterling, nah Ms. Dig, nah Ms. Sterling Respert. I never realized how long his name was, but it doesn’t matter because we have our whole life to fix it or so I thought.

Damn is that the sun again? I didn’t even notice it came up and went down again. It’s been a long time since I’ve stepped out of this fragment of thought. It’s weird how I haven’t noticed reality taking a cruel turn against me. The news struck me like a hammer strikes a nail.

I’m 14, almost 15, and pregnant. What do I do now? Do I abort, give it up, or raise it? Man all these problems. Was it worth giving him my virginity? Was it worth it to give my love blindly to a careless lover? Right now I’m not sure, but I’ll soon find out.

What am I thinking? Of course I was right. HE LOVES ME, and I trust him. I’ll tell my beloved when he comes home, but how? How do I explain? “Baye, I’m pregnant.” No that’s too informal. HA HA HA “Sweetie, you remember when Keisha told Deshawn she was pregnant?” No no no just tell him. O.K. He’ll understand. He loves you. You’re his #1 girl. “Baye... guess what?”

Didn’t even get to finish my sentence.

“What do you mean you’re pregnant? It ain’t mine!”

Damn I hate him and his resentment! How dare he deny me and my fruit.

“I thought you loved me.”

I guess I learned the hard way what is meant by “love hurts.”

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I’m five months pregnant, alone, and miserable.

He came back and apologized. I forgave him. I believed we had a chance.
I didn’t know it was gonna rain today. It’s storming. Why couldn’t it be a warm and sunny day so I can walk home in peace instead of riding a hectic bus with loud high school children? He and I argued again last night. When will the frustration end?

“Say Girl.”

“What?”

“Are you still mad at Dig?”

“Yeah!”

“You can’t stay mad at Dig!”

“Why not? If I’m mad, it’s cuz he caused me to get angry. Besides it is between him and me!”

“Girl, he dead.”

“Boy, get the... ohhh he put ya’ll up to this. Tell him to kiss my butt.”

What do you mean he’s dead? Newspaper article: “Boy is Killed!” screams the headline.

“Please don’t let it be him,” I pled with god. I read on. “Young man named Sterling Respert found shot to death in a stolen Dodge Intrepid.” Damn why me! I wasn’t prepared to lose him. I’m not ready to be a single parent. I’m not ready to say goodbye.

I’m nervous, depressed, crying.

Damn what now. I’m 9 months, still stuck. AH AH I’m in labor. It hurts. Why me? The pain is killing me. Why isn’t Dig here? Why isn’t he here to hold my hand? What happened? I thought I was his #1 girl. Oh man, I forgot he’s dead! He won’t get to see the birth of our child. Why me? I still ask. The flashbacks of false love and unimagined death get to me as I’m ready to deliver my baby alone.

“Ms Hernandez, now push! Take one more quick breath from the oxygen mask.”

What? I don’t get it. Talk slower. I’m not ready yet. There is no time!

“His head is coming out.”

“He?” I thought it was a girl.
He’s born, precious child. Those eyes have given me calm, peace, harmony, and happiness. He’s given me hope for the future. I love him and just met him. He reminds me of life outside of these thoughts that keep me in purgatory. He reminds me of me. By the way, did I tell you my name is Amelia? Yeah I’m a Dime, I’m cute. I believe that once again because of him. Because when I saw those eyes, I loved him. It had to be those ebony eyes like two X-rays to my soul. I’m free, 16, and in peace. Still I love him, my true beloved. What’s his name again? It’s Angelo, the great, the fabulous, my everlasting love, and my one-way ticket to reality. He was the only consolation a young and always at war with herself, destructive, young, and worried mother had. I learned that the best gift of life could come in little packages and sometimes adults are right about love. You have to give it time to follow your heart and your mind as well. Like India said, “if I were a song, I’d be a complicated melody, a complicated history.”

DAMN I almost couldn’t write it down.
THE MAN I LOVE (MY FATHER)
Tachmonite Butler, Frederick Douglass and McDonogh 35 High Schools

I.
“Why?”

“He ain’t nothing.”

“Why is this happening?”

“Son, I am not stupid. He didn’t come to get y’all, because he was with some woman.”

“Why is he always doing this? Why does he promise to come and never show up? Doesn’t he know…”

“Son, to tell you the truth…”

“Doesn’t he know how much this hurts?”

“Your pa only signed the papers for visitation rights to see ya’ll.”

“Why? Why? WHY?” I thought to myself as my mother complained about my father. For about ten years I thought this. Ten years I spent weekends crying because my father didn’t come to get my brothers and me. Ten years of broken promises. All of this caused me to hate my father. I began to hate him so much, that the only respect I had for him came in the form of the word “father.”

II.

Every morning at about 1 or 2 o’clock he comes in, puts food up in the fridge, then goes to sleep. About 4:30-5:00 in the morning I wake him up. This is just a typical day living with my father. My father works two jobs. Why? I don’t know. Maybe it’s because he has to provide for my brothers and me. Maybe, just maybe, my father has to work two jobs to support me, my brothers, my mother and stepfather, as well as himself.

III.

The ten years of my mother’s complaining came to an end as I started to become my own person—as I started to see my father more, as he started to fulfill promises, as we began to bond. Yet, again the question “why” is asked. This time it was not “Why is he hurting me?” but “Why is he trying to come into my life?” I personally thought he wanted to
be a part of the successes of my life, the goals I accomplished in my life—so he could take credit for everything I did, even though he had nothing to do with it.

IV.

But my suspicion was put to rest as my father talked about the “do’s” and “don’ts” of a man. We were sitting in a car as the automatic car wash washed the car. It was in that car I found out that my father was very much deprived of any joy. He told me that he had been working since the 9th grade, that he wanted to do a lot with his life. But his father, my grandfather, made him throw it all away. My father also knew that he wanted to be a better father than his. The birth of my father’s three sons gave him the chance to be that kind of father. But his divorce from my mother stunted that dream.

In the carwash and as I write about him, I begin to see more sides of my father and to appreciate and love him more.
THE LOST BOY: Story of Prince Rashad Favorite
Rashad Harness, McMain Secondary School

Once upon a time a lost boy finally found his way home. Or should I say a young man, since the boy has been practically missing for seventeen years. His family welcomed him home with open arms, and as he walked around in a world he no longer knew he could see the questions in their eyes of “Who is he?” “Where has he been?” “Why don’t we know him?”

His mind set had changed. He had known a world to be free of rules, free of speech, and full of the known. But in this world he had to be an example, a role model, an older brother, a middle son, some titles that he had never experienced all together in one.

His father, Emperor Favorite I, had established a dictatorship in which all of his family did what he said, and trying to argue him down would just be a waste of your time. Until I came. I am the lost boy, Rashad Harness. As we got closer and developed some similarities in bond, he tried to slowly extend his power over me. But as he never noticed I had already extended my power over him. I had already known which of his laws could be broken and the best way to get to him, so that I got my way.

I had developed bonds with all of my other family members, his loyal subjects, already. I had become the undercover elected king, or in the way I thought of it Prince Rashad Favorite. This dictatorship had become a monarchy, with each family member of the royal family’s view in mind. We weren’t taking his power or overlooking it. We were simply combining our power equally into our royal family, where rules were still written, by the king and queen, but the higher princes and princesses easily broke them, although they respected them.

But even though they called me brother, son, and I called them brother, sister, dad, mom, I didn’t know how to work myself into a family that was already a family. And I know me being there had changed things, but they were still comfortable without me, even while I was there. There was one day that they, except my dad, were dancing and playing and having fun just to have something to do. And I, just like my dad,
was sectioned off into my room. I guess we both have that conservative side where we just have to spend time alone and take a breath of our own air. There was one day my brother and I spent the whole day together as we usually did, but this time we walked home across the whole city at two o’clock in the morning from going to see a movie. How did we adapt? How did we all do it?

Well we’ll find out as the years go on, because honestly it’s still a work in progress. And as I call and talk to them almost every day I can still hear the change in our dad, but still we can hear the Emperor Favorite I, still treating us all like three-year-olds. But is it really tough love or is controlling really a problem in this lost family?
EVERYBODY HAS FLAWS, 
BUT I’M UNDERSTANDING

Vinnesia Shelbia, Frederick Douglass and McDonogh 35 High Schools

When we were asked to write about the men we love and the men we hate, the first person who came to mind was my father. I wrote a piece very quickly. I wrote about how I love him even though he has done things that aren’t right. One of the things I said in the first piece was that “I don’t know why I don’t have any bad feelings for him.”

I know that I wasn’t telling the truth. I wrote the first writing in January, and now it’s March, and I realize how much I don’t like my father. I didn’t’ want to write this piece, well write it truly, because I never wanted to look at the bad side. (I guess that’s why.) For every mistake he has made, I have forgiven him. He makes me think that he’ll just die, if I don’t forgive him. I love my daddy, but I realize that I can have negative feelings toward him.

A few days ago I was walking home from school. I saw my father in the middle of the street a block away. I thought he was just walking with my brothers to the store or something. My mother was on my step, and when I reached her, she said, “I’m so glad to see you. Your daddy is acting crazy.”

Right after that I went inside. I didn’t want to hear his mouth. When finally I decided to come out, he and my mother were sitting on the step. My mother was telling him that he was wrong for what he was doing. He had cursed all of the children out and ran them from behind our house. When he saw me, he asked me to go and get him a sandwich from the store. I went, got it, and he went inside and went to sleep. It was around 4:00 when he started resting. He woke at around 6:00. He asked my youngest brother to go and get a small fan. My brother told him that the fan was broke, and he couldn’t do anything about it. My father started screaming, and he threatened my mother, and she called the police. All of that happened Thursday. That Saturday he came back. He gave my mother a big bear and asked me for forgiveness. Of course I forgave him once more.

My father told me the reason why he acted in that way was because he had drunk a whole bottle of Jaegermeister. I told him to never drink
that again. He said that he would not drink anything any more during the week. I didn’t want him to go that far, but I guess he’s that serious. My father has a really soft spot in my heart. I’m scared that if he doesn’t have my love, he’ll lose himself.

You see, my daddy hasn’t always been in my life. He has lived a hard life. He has been in and out of jail, and one time he even got on drugs. My father is very honest with me. He tells me how he feels about things, like he’ll tell how he used to be when he was on drugs. He says that he thought that the drugs could make him feel happy, as happy as he was when he was with his family. So I think if he doesn’t have his family, then he will go back to the substitute. Now all my father does is smoke weed all day and all night and only once when at work. He says it balances him. Some people might think that he’s not setting a good example or that smoking weed is bad. To me it’s a miracle worker for my father.

Everybody has flaws, some worse than others, but I’m understanding.
A man I love is my stepfather. Even though he is not my real father, he has always been there for me. He lets me know that he will always be there for me. He helps me out of awkward situations and gives me advice when I need it. My stepfather, Milton, is the man in my life whom I love.

One time Milton helped me out of a very awkward situation. Around that time, I was really hard-headed, and I didn’t always do what I was supposed to do. One day I got into a situation outside, and I almost got a weapon to solve it. He caught me and talked to me. After we talked, I settled everything.

My stepfather also gives me advice when I need it. I can remember getting into it with my mother and almost leaving the house. Just before I left, he grabbed me by the arm, sat me down, and told me that I was in the wrong. I apologized to my whole family for my behavior.

Milton is also a very cool person. When he isn’t giving me advice, most of the time he and I are just hanging out. I treat him like he is one of the guys, and he doesn’t have a problem with it. Even though I treat him like a friend, I still respect him and his authority. I don’t try to take advantage of his kindness, and that is why our relationship is so strong.

I love my stepfather very much, and I cherish the time we spend together. I try to treat him with the respect he deserves. He is the man in my life who is a true father figure to me, and I love him for that.
How could they lie to me? How could they tell me my whole life was a lie?

I felt so estranged and couldn’t believe what they had told me. My mind was at total shock, and I wanted to thank Joe for taking care of me, but I couldn’t. I felt so spiteful. Instead I lashed out and acted like a total brat. I ran upstairs to my room and cried for hours. I fell asleep and dreamed about me falling into the abyss of hell. I awakened and noticed that Joe’s party was over. I felt so frustrated. So frustrated that I trashed my room and came across Joe’s gift that I had gotten him. The infamous toolset that I wanted to give him was sitting there right in front of me. I picked it up from the floor and threw it in the trash.

My demeanor changed dramatically, and I couldn’t explain it. For the weeks that followed I began behaving like a total asshole. I blamed my parents for everything that ever went wrong in my life. Like the generous parents they were, they took everything I threw at them. It only made me madder and more determined to make them feel so much regret for lying to me about the identity of my birth father. This revelation only seemed to affect me, because they kept telling me I would get over this, and we will continue to be a great family. I wanted them to suffer and suffer dearly. I just decided to leave home and move in with my grandmother and try to erase all this hidden pain. While at my grandmother’s I began to hear rumors from my brothers that my mom and step dad were getting into a lot of arguments. I honestly thought that it was their punishment for lying to me. But over the days I saw for myself that they were drifting apart. I regretted all the trouble I caused for them and decided to move back home.

But when I did get home, it was too late. He was gone. I felt like a total life wrecker. My mom didn’t really blame me, but I could see the hurt in her eyes as she looked at me. Later that year our family evacuated to Houston because of hurricane Katrina. My mother fell ill shortly after arriving in Houston and died at home in her sleep. After her death my step father began coming around again, and slowly I could feel us
start to rekindle our relationship. It was still kind of tense around us, but we tried. One day I won an award at school. I was so excited, and I called his job because I wanted to celebrate with him, but I learned that my step father Joseph Reynolds died while at work of a heart attack. That was a total blow and a knife in the gut. What an awful end to a struggling family.
MY FATHER AND MY RELATIONSHIPS

Ariel Wells, McDonogh 35 High School

Since I was younger, the relationship between men and women, to me, is simply reproduction. This is in non-family relationships. For me, I can’t see it as much more than that. My relationship with my father is basically the model for my relationships with males, and now, females. My father lied to me about anything, things that didn’t matter enough to be lied about. Now, after trusting someone and being let down so many times, I can’t trust anyone else.

“Without trust, you don’t have a relationship.” This is a phrase I’ve heard numerous times from the many romance movies I spend most of my free time watching. This phrase is the reason why none of my ‘relationships’ ever work. As stated before, I can’t trust anyone because I can’t trust him. And, honestly, I’m not really trying to trust him or anyone else. Besides, whenever I try to give my father or the people I decide to pursue relationships with the benefit of the doubt, they can’t handle it and end up failing at their job of loving, caring, cherishing, and appreciating me. Also, I have no respect for my father at this point. So in relationships, I find it hard to have respect for my mate, because I put them all in the same category as him.

On top of lying to me, my father never provided for me. Not fully. Not like a father should. You know, by going to work, providing more than just love for his family. For as long as I can remember, my father never held a job position longer than two years. He’s had plenty of good jobs which would eventually lead to good-paying careers, but he left each one for reasons unknown to me. I can’t understand why he never wanted to work because I was taught, by my mother, my primary caregiver for seventeen years, that in order to have a happy, comfortable life for my family and myself, I have to work for what I need and want, because no one was going to just give it to me. I will never be able to understand why he has not figured this out for himself.

As I’ve said, my father isn’t there for me. And since he isn’t there, I turned to other males to make up for his absence. For instance, at a young age, I was ‘boy crazy.’ And at seventeen, I think I still have that
characteristic. Growing up without a father doing what he should also pushed me to look for someone else to take on that fatherly role. After Hurricane Katrina, two men have stepped in the picture, in different ways, to fill his shoes. One man, my adoptive father, Francois has done more for me in three years than my father has done in seventeen. He’s been there for me and had talks with me that my father should have, like the talk about boys and sex. And during the struggle with discovering my true sexuality, he is there for me. Unlike my father, who, after hearing about it from his friend at church last school year, told me that I should just “stick to boys” because being with girls is “embarrassing to the family,” as if we had one of those.

The other man, Randall, is my mother’s boyfriend. Even though our relationship hasn’t been the best, he has always been there for me and my family, especially my mother, who I think needed someone the most. So, whether he likes it or not, my father’s shoes have been filled. And at this point, I’m wondering if he’ll ever be able to step back into them.
How was your life back in Vietnam? That question was always on my mind every time I talked to my dad. Every moment he sat down to rest, I would be there, waiting to pop the question. But at my every attempt, he would always stare straight at me and tell me to go complete homework or a chore. That was some years ago.

I remember my last attempt to ask that question and the answer I received. Except the answer wasn’t from dad. It was from something else. It was like the usual times. My 51-year-old dad sat on the couch, reading his Vietnamese magazine that comes in the mail every month. My 12-year-old self was on the computer, playing pinball and working my way to first place. So absorbed into the game, I wasn’t aware of my dad behind me. When the game was over, I noticed and asked my usual question.

“Dad,” I began, “what was your life back in Vietnam?”

“What do you mean?”

“How were your childhood and your teenage life in Vietnam?” I replied. “You know, your past.”

He stared at me. “Don’t you have homework or chores to do?”

“Nope.”

His head turned away, and his eyes stared into space. I could tell he was remembering something, though what it was I didn’t know. Dad finally stood up with a sigh and left.

Dismayed, I turned my attention to the computer desk. I saw my dad’s stack of pictures and rummaged through the photos. For the first time I saw a faded, black and white picture of a 5-year-old boy. It was 1956. It was Dad. I never paid attention to it before. Curious, I kept flipping through the photos. Pictures of teenager Dad working in an orphanage and participating in Boy Scouts came up. It was odd. I had looked in this stack of photos before. Why didn’t I see these pictures before? At the end I saw a military man with his platoon. It seemed like the photo took place at a South Vietnamese army base. Nineteen-year-old Dad
was standing in a row with his fellow soldiers. His face wasn’t happy or full of smiles like the pictures before. It was grim and determined. I looked at that picture carefully, and realization dawned on me. Dad had fought in the Vietnam War.

I still remember how shocked I was during that moment. But that moment sprung more questions. Did the war affect him that much not to talk about his past? Is he remembering what happened back then but too hurt to tell? Those new questions will never be asked nor answered. Why? I have asked myself that question many times. My answer is even though I am curious, I don’t want to stir any dark memories that may lay hidden in his mind. War is something no one should go through. People shouldn’t experience the memories of death in the battlefield, or the first time they were ordered to shoot just to kill. If he doesn’t want to talk about his past, I won’t push him to answer my questions any more.
IF I COULD ONLY REMEMBER

Steven Grant, Frederick Douglass High School

If I could only remember, why did I make so many bad choices. Maybe it was because of my peers, or maybe it was just my fears.

I could have never pictured myself doing some of the things I’m now doing. Ten years ago I was just some smart kid planning for college, not concerned about my peers, only knowledge.

But I’ve been through some different situations as of late, dealing with the losses of both grandmothers and slowly starting to part with my mother. I’ve never really had a relationship with my father, so I’ve really had to go through many situations without having the proper advice or seeing the situation from a man’s perspective. I’ve learned a lot of things the hard way, because there really was no other way for me to learn them.

Growing up around killers and drug dealers, there’s really nothing I’ve never seen or heard. I probably can deal with any situation or scenario you could throw at me. I think I’ve done just about anything you can name, not by choice, but because of growing up without the proper support of my family. I felt as if no one really cared about me or their selves.

But I try not to think about it.
While you were away from me in and out of prison you made all these promises and pleas that I knew you couldn’t keep, but I believed you anyway. Hoping that you changed from your ways. Your ways of ignoring me as if you don’t even have a daughter. Instead you let me down, once again.

I can remember the younger days of my life when you and I used to go to City Park to our little hang out spot. The spot by the swings and the pond. Where we fed the ducks and took pictures. I can remember this as clear as day. Then all of a sudden things started to change. You and mama split, and I guess you felt that, “hey, since I don’t see her every day, it doesn’t matter.”

Well, dad, it does matter. I would like to have a daddy instead of a paw, instead of my mama’s boyfriend taking care of me. He takes care of me as if I’m his own daughter. You know dad, he’s been more of a father to me than you have ever been. You can never make up for the lost time, broken promises, and the stand-ups. The days you were supposed to pick me up but never did. To refresh your memory, it was the year Easter fell on my birthday. My friends and I were on our way to the lake, but you called and told me not to go because you were on your way to get me, that you wanted to take me out for my Sweet 16th Birthday. I let my friends go and told them after you and I finished I’d have you to drop me off by them. I guess your car broke down and you were out of change, so you couldn’t call me to let me know either you were running late or you just wouldn’t make it. Instead you stood me up. I didn’t hear from you until New Year’s Day when I was leaving church. It’s cool, but the man that’s in my life now makes sure I have a ride, food to eat, and clothes to wear. He was the one who was there picking up my mama’s slack when she fell short. He got me my first job. He was there for me.

You called from jail when Jonathan died, but that wasn’t enough. You yourself were not there.

I love the man who’s taken your place. I have nothing but love for him. I love him like my own. For some reason I just can’t call him daddy. Why? Could it be that I want you to be there? I don’t know, but all I
know is that if you were to come back into my life, I would love you but not always be around you. Mainly because Lynn Rounds has been my daddy. He has been more of a daddy to me half my life than you’ve been all my life. Instead of saying, “Sometimes I feel like a fatherless child,” I should say biological fatherless child, because believe it or not I have two fathers to be exact: my spiritual father and my step-father. So I’m telling you to give big ups to this man who has taken your place. He hasn’t let me down yet. He brags on me, has everyone on the job thinking I’m his real daughter. I started working at Traffic Court, and everybody there knows that I dance, they know I’m an “A” student. They think I’m his baby girl. May as well be. But you know daddy? In the words of your favorite rap artist Tupac Shakur, “I ain’t mad at cha.”
When I was young, my mother and father were doing drugs.
I got put in the homes, because they didn’t show love.
Now I’m just praying to the lord above.
Now I’m with this girl as life gets real.
Now I’m just wondering why my sister disappeared.
My sister never had a chance to live her life,
but my mother and father were the ones using the pipe.
Now I’m living in this house, and we’re trying to catch a mouse
that’s running around when I’m just trying to get to the playground.
HE’S MY DADDY

Erika Snowden, Frederick Douglass High School

It was March, I believe. I was browsing on the computer when I realized that you can find out information on inmates in the Orleans Parish Prison. When I entered my daddy’s name, his rap sheet came up. So I started looking at all the things he done did since back in 1989. It really hurt me to know that the man I called my daddy has been doing some of the stupidest shit a person can do.

Starting in 1989 he went to jail for burglary. Alright, I knew he was a thief, but in 1990 he went for grand theft auto. Alright, that’s not new either. But what shocked me and had my attention was August 28, 1991. He went to jail for molesting a juvenile under the age of 12, and it really hurt me, because I didn’t know the man I called my daddy was a child molester. So I called Tyeasha and asked her to see it. She looked at his rap sheet, and I was embarrassed of myself that this man’s wrongdoings have people downgrading me and his family. I don’t know why he’s doing these things. And just three days before finding this out, I wrote him a letter about how much I miss him and believe in him. And here he made me less interested in being a part of his life, when I found this out.

So I went home. I was scared to ask my mom, because I didn’t want to think it was me or my sister or even my cousin. So I finally built up the courage to ask, and she said, “I didn’t know that myself. That’s the first time to my ears.” So I’m thinking all these years his family not wanting to have anything to do with him has affected me from seeing them or really getting to know them. But you know what? It doesn’t matter how much I don’t agree with the things he does or me having nothing to do with him any more. Even if I say I hate him, it’s not gonna change the fact that he’s my daddy.
“DADDY, WHY ARE YOU PUTTING THAT POWDER IN THEM PLASTIC BAGS?”

Tana Montrel, McMain Secondary School

“Daddy, why are you putting that powder in them plastic bags?” I can see it coming now. He’s about to tell me another stupid lie to get him out of what I just saw.

“Oh so when we go out, if Josh makes poo poo, we can put it on his booty.” He must have thought because I was young I was stupid and didn’t know what he was doing.

It seems like after that he kept on slipping up. “Anny stay in the car.” Here goes another drug mission; little did he know I was looking out the rear view mirror at his every single move. After that I thought what he was doing wasn’t so bad, especially when I saw him coming to the car with a bag full of money. But little did I know with the money came a whole pile of money-greedy women. Because money and sex are the only things you can get out of a married man. That meant it wasn’t all about his family any more. It was now about the money, clothes, cars, women, and then the kids.

Don’t get me wrong. My dad was a wonderful father, and a lot of kids looked up to him. You probably ask yourself how can you look up to someone who sold drugs and was bringing down the community. My father wasn’t just a drug dealer, but he was like a father to most of them. He gave a lot of the boys money to buy food, clothing, and also paid some of their bills when their family had no way of paying it. One thing about my father was that he did his thing in the streets, but he tried to keep as many boys out of the streets by providing for them, so they wouldn’t have any reason to hustle.

At first my father was in the streets for his family, but in the end he was there for himself. Once my dad saw the things he was getting from dealing drugs and the power he gained, it was hard to give them up. He had money out the ass, women coming from every which way, and cars only the rich could afford. He couldn’t say it was to support the family any more, because my mother now had a restaurant that took care of
our every need. He started buying unnecessary things like Versace underwear and Ferraris and Porsches to drive around.

I think my father realized his wrong doing after he ended up in jail for six years. After my father went to jail everything he did all came out. My mother left him, he had a child by a childhood babysitter, and all twenty-something of his side women confronted my mom. Once my dad got out of jail he said the street remade him, and when it was finished, it took his whole life with it. He lost most of his family and friends. Nobody seems to want to be around him any more, because his money isn’t the same. He changed his life around but destroyed a lot in the process.

And his lifestyle definitely affected me. I became highly addicted and attracted to gangsters and drug dealers. A lot of his street kids became hustlers, and two of my street brothers died in the process. But I don’t have just a simple judgment about it. I feel even though you’re doing something wrong and are destroying the community, you can still save a lot of people in that process. If you decided to let it go, you can destroy more people than before. I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you if my father’s hustling, or changing his life around, was best for all of us.

A lot of people in our country sell drugs to support their families or themselves. They feel that selling drugs is their last resort. They realize once they start it’s hard to quit, unless they go to jail or end up dead in the street. They get hooked up in the game and fast money. They gain power they don’t want to give away. It’s like they’re king, and the poor are begging them for food, but in the street it’s a little bit different. Crack heads are begging them for crack, dope fiends begging for dope, and little kids are begging for weed. It’s a shame, but that’s how it is in the streets.

I’m happy that my father changed his life around, but he’s just not the same any more. My father and I used to be tight, like best friends, and I’m just not used to the changes yet. We used to go on drug missions, but now the only mission we go on is church. I’m glad he made the change, but I’m also confused, because part of me, on the inside, misses my old dad.
For as long as I can remember my dad has always been in my life. He has been there for my ups and downs. Also he is an extremely hard worker. For the longest he has worked to get my mother, brother, and me all the things we wanted in life, and somehow he always managed to come through for us. As a kid growing up I always figured that he got all his money from working long extraneous hours. But as I got older my mind started wondering why my dad would go out late at night without my mom, when they would usually go out together. But being that my adolescent mind had a short attention span I forgot about these thoughts quite easily. But it wouldn’t be long until these thoughts would manifest themselves into a gruesome reality.

It all started on one hot summer day. For some reason on this particular day my dad was very jumpy and had a look of nervousness that even as a child I recognized. The day was proving to be a typical summer day. My brother and I went to camp, and my parents went off to work. The day began to lose its normalcy when my mom said my dad might not be coming home that night, which was strange because my dad always made it a point to make sure he saw me and my brother every night. So we made our way home, ate dinner as we usually did, watched some television, and then my mom put us to sleep. On this night sleeping proved to be a difficult task. My mind was filled with thoughts and predictions about why my dad might not be coming home that night. Then in the late hours of night I heard the biggest boom I have ever heard. I jumped up to find my mom screaming and my home swarming with men dressed in all black. It was complete chaos. I didn’t know what to think or what to do. My mom was in a petrified state, and our house was being ransacked.

In the middle of all this chaos I can remember my grandmother snatching my brother and me up and taking us to her house. I was in a state of shock. I had no clue to what had just happened. The days following this ordeal were awkward, and few words were shared between the family, and when they were, it was a secret between the adults. But the strangest thing for me was the fact that I hadn’t seen my father. Then early on Saturday morning my mom got my brother
and me up and went to a place I could have never imagined seeing but on TV. We were in the Orleans Parish Prison. We went through what seemed like a million security checks to get to this room where the tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife. The room was cold, and there was a large glass that separated the room. Once we got settled we sat down. Then a door on the other side of the glass opened, and my dad came through with a look of sorrow and disappointment. My mom burst into tears and went into a mode of hysteria. Then my dad went on to explain what happened and that it was caused by his involvement in the drug trafficking business. At this point in time this all went in one ear and out the other, because I was so young I just knew I wanted my dad back. It wasn’t until later in life that I realized fully what happened.

My dad ended up going to trial and serving a little short of one year in prison. I still admire my dad though, because he didn’t let this mishap break his pride or his spirit: when he came home, he became a better person, and he never looked back on his past and kept moving on towards a positive, legal future.
NAILS KISSING HAMMERS, 
DADS TALKING TO SONS
Sadiq Watson, McDonogh 35 High School

The sound of nails
Kissing hammers,
the plywood hitting the
Two by fours.

It is what I hear while I’m building a shed. We make several trips to
Home Depot. “I need two 7-foot 6 x 4’s for the roof,” my Dad calls out as I
grab three 10-foot pieces.

We always take a break to talk about how we’re doing or what is going
on in school. “Should I be expecting any deficiencies this quarter?” I can
respond to such questions easier when we’re doing something—like
building a shed—together. I hope to have this type of relationship with
my children, when I grow up.

We crack jokes and work with the sun. We level up the front wall. “Hold
it right there,” my dad says as he goes to get nails and hammers two on
each side. When the plank turns out not to be level, he just laughs, takes
out the nail, and says, “I ain’t gon’ let ya’ll bring me down.”

It’s hot, but I love it. This is about the only quality time I get, because my
dad is working all the time. He’s working even when he’s not working.

He works three strenuous jobs. He wakes up around 3:00 a. m. to
stuff and throw newspapers. Then he makes it to the hire place for
longshoremen, and then he goes to SeaLand, where he unloads ships
until 12:00 p. m. Then he comes home in sweat-drenched clothes.
Despite these tiring jobs he still finds time to cut grass. He has been
doing these things since before I was five, which was around the time
my mom left. So he is a single parent on top of all these things, and he
has brought us up pretty well.

He taught us how to make money, even when he’s not around, by
waking us up at 7:30 a. m. to cut grass until 3 or 4 in the afternoon. He
also has shown us how to throw papers. I’m happy he did not let me be
lazy on Saturdays and Sundays. Now when he’s gone, I will be able to
take care of myself.
He is the Black father that many children are missing. I admire that he makes time to talk and see how we’re doing when he’s home from his job and working around the house with his children.
One man that I do love but also hate is my daddy. I never got a chance to get to know him like I always wanted to. He and my mother split up when I was younger. My daddy and I never got a chance to have a relationship like a father is supposed to have with his child, because he couldn’t handle his responsibilities. I really don’t see my father often, because he’s been from house to house ever since he got out of prison. I hate the fact that I was raised by one person but made by two people. I would like to have two parents. In my heart I do, and that’s my mother.

When I was younger, my grandmother and sometimes my mother would take me to see my father in prison. I used to love to go and see him, because I really did believe everything he used to tell me. When I talked to him over the phone, he used to say when he got out of jail he would take me shopping and to the movies. We would go anywhere I wanted and do everything I wanted to do. Since my father got out of prison, I haven’t done one thing with him. It really hurt me to see that my father lied to me and never took the time to work things out with me.

Everything my dad used to tell me seems like a lie now. I haven’t heard from him since we ran into each other at Footlocker a few months ago. He decided to call me the next day, but who knows where he is now. I talk to my grandmother sometimes, but she always tells me she has no clue where he’s staying or how he’s been. Next month sometime, my dad’s sister is getting married. I plan to attend the wedding, so I guess I’ll see him there. I love my daddy, but I hate him too, because he hasn’t been there for me. However, I’m alright, because I have my mother, and she’s both of my parents.
They say when you’re around someone for a long time, you start looking and acting like that person. The problem is that I didn’t want to be like him in any way, but what can I say? I have his eyes, his hair, and recently I’ve acquired his personality. Lately I go crazy and snap. I bitch slap my little brother, and on more than one occasion I’ve drawn blood from my little sister’s lips. I didn’t want to be like him, but I did it anyway. And something inside me is telling me that I let him win.
For Christmas I visited my dad in Sacramento, California. The last time I had seen him was at my brother’s graduation, two years ago. The few times that he called I didn’t pick up the phone, because for some reason just listening to him speak hurt. I hated the fact that I couldn’t see him the way I should have, and sometimes I just hated him. I burned a picture of our house in Alaska, that home that was nothing but cement when my parents stopped touching each other, stopped playfully biting shoulders.

It was awkward being around him when I got there, and a lot of times I wouldn’t talk to him without being spoken to. He asked me questions.

“Remember how you walked backwards when the lights were turned off, because you didn’t want monsters to grab you?” And I’d laugh because it was funny the way he imitated my backing out of a dark room, and he’d smile because I had laughed.

In Sacramento, his wife, Tara, made me feel uncomfortable. It seemed that she was just this unmoving block of flesh that wasn’t meant to be, that shouldn’t be hugging my mother’s husband (I sometimes leave out the ex part). Tara and I exchanged fake smiles out of necessity. If my dad wasn’t in the room, we’d loom around in a silence that was better than communicating with one another. I made her feel threatened, because she knew that if I so much as complained to my dad about her, she would be nothing more than a thought. Jokingly, my dad called me her Pandora’s Box.

When she wasn’t around I’d feel better, open up more to my dad. I’d forgotten how funny he could be, the way he smelled like intense things.

When I left Sacramento, I cried because no matter how hard I try to act like I don’t miss my dad, I remember that I desperately do.
“Mom, can I go sleep over at Thanh’s house tonigghhhttt?” I knew why I asked my mother rather than my father. My mother is a sweet, kind person who gives in easily. Since I was little, the word “no” rarely came out of my mother’s mouth. A Sunday dress I wanted in the store would later be found on her daughter’s precious body.

My father objected to my mother’s treatment of his children. “The children need to know how it feels not always getting their way,” he told my mother later. My parents’ discussions with one another only showed my siblings and me how much they loved us.

My father would definitely say no. He believed I should learn when someone tells me no. “It won’t be your happiest moment, but you’ll have to accept and learn how to deal with it.” He also believed any daughter is too precious to sleep over at anyone’s house, a family’s friend or not. A daughter should be home, sleeping in her own bed until the day she gets married. My grandfather gave similar rules to my aunts, and that became clearly the tradition in his family.

My dad’s strict rules made me love my mother more. I adore my mother, and she wanted me to be like her. She thought sleeping at Thanh’s house was an excellent time for the girls to bond together. Sleeping over would be a great opportunity for me to become more lady like, knowing we were going to play with Barbie dolls and practice our manners.

My parents’ discipline of raising their children impacted my character. I have my mother’s sweet qualities and my father’s strict behaviors. Even though I don’t like my dad sometimes, I know his harsh ways were to help me. He wanted to prepare me for the future, and he made sure I wasn’t too sheltered with my mother’s love. My parents’ combination in raising their children worked well, because I’ve grown to be a respectful, good daughter.
I’m divorcing my husband. We go to court next week. We’ve been having problems for quite a while. Even before the storm. Irreconcilable differences will be the official reason for the split. It’s a “no fault” divorce. But although this decision was born of many hours of painful self-evaluation and thought, it was one epiphanic moment that sealed the deal for me.

I made the decision to finally file for divorce just over a year ago. One afternoon when I said something my husband didn’t like, he grabbed me by my arms and shoved me against a door so hard I saw stars. I knew there would be blood on my head, on the door. My arms hurt. My head hurt, but the most painful reminder of that day was not the series of big black finger mark bruises on my arms that meant I couldn’t wear my sun dress to Jazz Fest. It wasn’t even the lump on my head that made sleeping hurt. The thing about that day that was so excruciating, the thing that cut me to the quick was the sentence he spit in my face as he pinned me to the door. “Now, I know why your father used to beat you.” The sentence came out of his mouth like vomit. As I stood there, with a lump the size of a lemon forming on the back of my head, I thought to myself, “You have no idea why my father used to beat me. No one does.”

When I was a little girl, I was my daddy’s favorite. He always wanted a boy. When he held me in his arms for the first time, he said I was no bigger than a football, and he always called me his little pig skin. From that day forward he taught me how to punt and pitch, how to dribble and how to change the oil in our car. We did everything together.

Then something changed.

My father was not an alcoholic or a drug addict, so I can’t blame a substance for his actions. But from the time I was 12 years old until I escaped my home at 18, my father beat me whenever I said anything that he didn’t like. Sometimes I just got hit in the face. Sometimes I got shoved against a door or a wall. I had big bruises I tried to cover up. Long sleeves even in the summer. Jeans year round.
One summer evening I was doing dishes in the kitchen, and I said something my father didn’t like. He took the dishrag out of my hand, stuffed it in my mouth and pushed me out of the room, through the hallway and into the bathroom where he knocked my head against the tile wall over and over again. I remember my father’s strength and how I couldn’t move or fight him off. I remember the gagging feeling of the cloth in my mouth. I remember the dish soap coming out my nose most of all. It stung like hell.

My mother and younger sister were witnesses to all of the violence. When I was 17, my father shoved me into a door in the living room. I hit the door knob with my back, bruising a kidney. My father threw me onto the couch and pulled his fist back to hit me. My mother tried to pull my father off of me. He slung her to the ground and came back at me. In a moment of bravery my mother picked up the kitchen phone and dialed the police. My father ripped the phone out of the wall and hurled it to the floor, shattering it. As he beat my mother in the kitchen of our home, I crawled out of the room, down the hall and to my bedroom in the back of the house and picked up the extension. The police were on the line already. My mom had actually made the connection before the kitchen phone was destroyed. I told them our address and what had happened. All I could think of was that my mom and dad were fighting in the kitchen. I was afraid he’d pick up a knife.

The police came and hauled my father to jail. My sister told me how embarrassed she was going to be at school. The neighbors had seen the police at our house. How could I do that to her, to us?

My father currently lives in a nursing home in Seguin, Texas. He suffers from Pick’s Disease which causes the frontal lobe of the brain to deteriorate at a drastic rate. My father has no short term memory. He can remember marrying my mother and, I suppose, beating me to a pulp on a regular basis, but he can’t remember what he had for breakfast.

I remember everything.

I remember trying to figure out why I was singled out. Why I was the one who got hurt. I came up with all kinds of reasons. I got hurt because I spoke my mind. I got hurt because I couldn’t be who my father wanted me to be. I got hurt because my father was just an angry man who needed someone to take it all out on. Intellectually, I knew these were not excuses for my father’s behavior, but deep down inside, I have always felt unlovable.
They say that the relationship you have with your father will influence every relationship you have with a man. Well mine certainly did. And it’s not fair.

It’s not fair that I confuse people by pushing them away emotionally while pulling them to me physically. It’s not fair to my children that I can’t love their father any more. It’s not fair to me that I never knew what made my father snap, what made him hurt me. It is that helplessness, that feeling that life is chaotic and ugly and that men are unpredictable and violent that I have fought for 35 years. And it’s exhausting.

When my husband hit me that day and spit those words in my face, he opened an old wound still so fresh he might as well have stabbed me with a kitchen knife.

I share Saddi’s rage. I share Naila’s hate. I share Dominique’s tears. I can’t reconcile the horrible feeling of being hurt over and over again by someone who should have loved me. I can’t get beyond the hate even after 35 years. It lies beneath the surface of every relationship I have.

So on June 24th I’ll go to court and legally mourn another dead relationship with the latest in a line of men I have looked to for love and acceptance.

I know a divorce is just a band-aid for this gaping wound. What’s going to happen in the next relationship? What’s going to happen to me?

Sometimes I feel as though I should greet every man with a warning sign. Or maybe wear a letter, not scarlet, but blue. And not an “A” but maybe an “F” for “fragile.”

On second thought, a “D” for “damaged” or “don’t bother” might be more accurate.

I know they say that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.

But I’m not feeling so strong right now.
The impetus towards my self improvement stems from my father. As a child, I deemed him miserly, selfish, ruthless, cold. Mental cruelty leaves scars that are not physically apparent but take so long to heal and never really leave you. Like a man who looks in the mirror, does not like what he sees, so he alters his appearance (growth/removal of facial hair, adoption of skin care regimen, dieting and/or exercising,... etc...), I make the very best from my emotional scars. Now as a grown man, I have analyzed my father’s actions, decided that most were terrible but also some were quite credible, even praiseworthy, and embraced what I liked into forming my ever evolving personality. I do not say any more I am how I am despite of him but simply that he was a man and I was his son, but a man in my own right, with my own. Thoughts of him no longer violently stir my mind or emotions but leave me with calmness, sometimes even a smirk, sometimes, even, just a smile.
MEN FROM HISTORY
RESISTANCE TO ENSLAVEMENT/OPPRESSION: Baukman Dutty

Brandy Brown, McDonogh 35 High School

With every big event in history, a series of people, organizations, and/or incidents have started the ball rolling. Nothing of significance in history has just magically appeared. We often learn about one famous person or event and hear no mention of the supporting and contributing figures. For example, when we study the Haitian Revolution at the turn of the 19th Century, we learn about Toussaint L’Ouverture and the Louisiana Purchase but hear nothing about Baukman Dutty and much less the unnamed people who supported his revolutionary action.

Baukman Dutty was one of the contributing factors to the Haitian Revolution. In the years before 1796 and the start of the Haitian Revolution, Baukman gave hope to many enslaved Africans and struck fear in the hearts of white slave owners. Sold from Jamaica, Baukman eventually settled on the Clement plantation, where he worked as a driver and coachman. This work enabled him to travel to different plantations and contact other revolutionary-minded enslaved Africans. Baukman then killed his master and ran away into the hills, living as a maroon. He wanted to start a revolution and spent years planning it and training his forces.

In 1791, his plan was to be put into action. But before that could happen, Baukman’s army was attacked, and he was beheaded. However, instead of suppressing the maroons’ change-seeking spirit, his death strengthened their resolve. He was adored by the enslaved Africans and honored as a legendary figure who represented their hopes for freedom.

Baukman Dutty’s story is not in many history books nor is his name a household name, as it should be. But he died a beloved martyr of his people and a man whom all people who respect freedom and democracy should love.
Malo the Visionary:

In 1774, Juan Malo buried his ax in the first cypress tree of Gaillardiland, saying,

“Malheur au blanc qui passera ces bornes.”

(“Woe to the white who would pass this boundary.”)

This boundary was the Louisiana swamps, where the ghostly white fog clung stubbornly to the roots of the old cypress trees, their long trunks like guardians looking over the swamp’s creatures.

He looked around this dead swamp, standing motionless like a picture. Amongst the moss-covered trees, he envisioned his maroon colonies, using the grayish mist of fog and the ancient faces of the cypress to keep enemies away. He could see his band, men and women, painting a rainbow of yellows, reds, and mahoganies on the swamp’s living canvass.

No longer slaves, men with masters and laws to break their backs and spirits, instead he saw fine craftsmen shaping cypress into sturdy chairs to sit the elderly and tables to sit their wives and little children.

Malo looked upon the house decks of his mind and saw the women no longer the “mules of the world,” talking without bending and breaking or cutting or pulling, but laughing and living a free life.
Freedom buzzed in his ear like swamp mosquitoes,
Dripped from his mind like cypress blood.
The ax like a dagger in the cypress heart set the boundary of freedom, and so he said,
“Woe to the white who would pass this boundary.”
BE LIKE DAVID
Gabrielle Turner, McDonogh 35 High School

“If any wish to plunge me into the wretched incapacity of a slave, or murder me for the truth, know ye, that I am in the hands of God, and at your disposal.”

This quote comes from David Walker’s pamphlet Walker’s Appeal. Walker, a strong Christian, was an intelligent, courageous, free man of color, who lived in the 1700’s and early 1800’s.

Most young people look up to celebrities or people with six figure salaries. They see the rappers with all the money and women and the basketball players with the fame. They want to be like Mike. Why not be like David?

True greatness isn’t measured in dollars. David Walker was a great man.

Walker was the son of a slave father and a free mother. He was born in North Carolina but later settled in Boston, where he owned a clothing store. Being free and wealthy wasn’t enough.

Walker traveled all over the United States. He took notice of his people and how Americans who called themselves Christians were treating them. In 1829-30, he wrote an appeal describing the way these white Americans who supported slavery treated blacks and dishonored their country and religion. He wrote to the blacks for unity and action. He urged them to stand up and not let the white man deprive them of their freedom and happiness.

His boldness inspires me. I want the kind of passion he has, to be able to stand up against anyone and anything, for what I believe. There are times when I see my peers doing wrong. I hear them curse. They steal and do things that I know aren’t right. I know I should say something. I want to say something, but I don’t. I am afraid.

One summer a couple of friends and I decided to go to the zoo. We got tired of walking around in the hot sun. One of the girls suggested that we go to the gift shop, where it was cool. Her cousin worked in the gift shop. I sat down, while the others browsed the shop. The girl, holding up an umbrella, asked her cousin, “can you give a discount for this?”
Her cousin said, “yes.” After that everyone else started asking her for discounts. After a while of grabbing things, they stopped asking her for discounts and just started taking things and sticking them in their purses. I just sat back and watched them. I started getting nervous, because they started taking too much. I went outside and sat on the bench with my head down. When I looked up, the police were heading toward the gift shop. My friends got caught, but they didn’t go to jail. The girl almost lost her job. I really wanted to stop them, and I should have, but I didn’t.

The boldness that I admire is the reason Walker lost his life. Because his appeal was widely distributed, the people in the south were angry. If you were caught reading his appeal, you were hung. A price was put on Walker’s head. On June 28, 1830, soon after the third edition of his appeal, Walker was found dead near his shop, possibly poisoned.

Walker died for his convictions. He wasn’t afraid to die, because he knew his life was in the hands of God.
FREDERICK DOUGLASS WRITES A FAREWELL LETTER TO HIS DAUGHTER

Dayoka Edmonds and Marlon Cross, Frederick Douglass High School

Dearest Annie, My Youngest Child:

I can remember the first time you grasped my index finger. Fresh from the womb, your small voice cried loud as I held you in my arms. Annie, you were as beautiful as roses and daisies in a spring garden. Your voice spoke to me quietly in a language that I didn’t understand. Inside my heart I knew you wouldn’t have to slave for freedom as much as I did. My youngest love, my youngest life, you remind me of the ocean.

As I write you this letter, the waves rock this ship like your cradle rocked you when I was too busy with your four older siblings. I sit on deck and watch the waves. I think of your ways, soft and calm, at times, rough and fast, but always a wonderful sight to see. Just last month when you were drawing a picture of your baby doll, I disturbed you, asking you to pick up your shoes. The tone of your voice was sweet even when you didn’t want to be bothered. Why, I would have done anything for you. I learned that from my own mother. She went through a 24-mile walk after work just to come see her son, your father. She worked in the fields on another plantation, while the other children and I stayed 12 miles away. She cared for me just as much as I care for you. I think of her long journey as I cross the Atlantic Ocean once again, placing my life in danger, weeping that your earthly life has ended.

How my heart wishes to walk into my residence to see the face of my Annie, those eyes like your mother’s that sparkle in the moonlight, those pretty white teeth that shine in the dark, and that graceful smile that to which no other can ever compare. I know that inside my heart everything happens for a reason. I am so sorry that I could not have been in your presence to adore you with my love, to kiss your cheek, as your soul passed to the next life.

You must understand why I was away the day you died, only eight years old. You won’t know the name John Brown or the meaning of the words abolition and justice. But these are some of the reasons
I was away. John Brown’s skin was white but his soul was pure. His heart was set on one goal—abolishing slavery. He too is now dead. Our country wants me to join him. I knew of his plot to attack Harper’s Ferry, take over the weapons there, and wage war against slaveholders. I told no one about this plot. For that this country, which declares itself a defender of the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness, accuses me of treason. I do not regret my silence about Brown’s plot. I only regret its failure, his death, and most of all my absence as you took your last breath.

So now I journey again. The water, the source of life, gives me little comfort. I return to your four siblings and dear mother. I return to a country stuck in greed and evil. I also return with the hope of freedom for all. I pledge my life to remain in this country, to die fighting for freedom for all people rather than to escape to another country. Your untimely departure tells me where I must remain. It reinforces my determination, my conviction that I will never be free until all my people are free. Thank you for this gift you give me on your leaving. Forgive my absence at your departure.

All Love Always,

Your Father, Frederick A. Douglass
In 1860 Francis E. Dumas was worth a quarter of a million dollars. He spoke five languages, including French and Spanish. He was such a good soldier that his Major General, Benjamin Butler, the leader of union troops in the whole Louisiana, said to him you are a better officer than I am. Dumas was one of Louisiana’s bigger slaveholders. I couldn’t believe he was a black man.

When I first digested these unbelievable facts about this man, I almost immediately vomited: Some black men are always more than ready to sell us out to help themselves. They refuse to struggle on behalf of their people so we all can be better off. Like when Kunta was captured by his own brother.

You should have seen me trying to swallow the disgusting spit of a black man enslaving his own people. He gets a little bit money and wants to roll with the evil guys.

My teachers saw me struggling and gave me another thought to chew on: maybe he didn’t do it to his people but for his people. I was confused, but I thought he was in the Union Army fighting against the Confederates and all, so maybe he owned slaves to help free them—or at least opposed slavery in the long run. Like when folks in England bought Frederick Douglass so he could be free.

Dumas no longer leaves a bad taste in my mouth. In fact I crave more information about guys like him who are willing to risk their fame and fortune for their people.
Dr. A.P. Dostie, born in New York of French-German descent, moved to New Orleans in 1852. He was forced to flee the city in 1861 because he publicly opposed Louisiana joining the Confederate states in seceding from the United States.

He later returned to New Orleans after it was occupied by Union troops and quickly became a strong supporter of Nathaniel P. Banks, a military commander of the Department of the Gulf.

Dostie and Banks were part of the constitutional convention that made a new constitution for Louisiana in 1864. The document abolished slavery—before the United States did. Dostie was one of the supporters of giving blacks the right to vote in the new constitution also, but the convention could not come to agreement on that point. The members did, however, leave open the possibility of the legislature or a reconvened Constitutional Convention to give black suffrage.

In 1866, the forty-five-year-old dentist endorsed reconvening the convention to give blacks the right to vote. To rally support for the convention, Dostie and his allies held a rally on July 29, the night before the convention would reconvene. Speaking to a large, predominantly black crowd of supporters, Dostie shouted, “We have got you your freedom. Now will you fight for your votes?”

“We will; we will,” the crowd responded and then chanted, “Fight to vote! Fight to vote!” over and over. Dostie encouraged the crowd to come to the Mechanical Institute on Monday to show their support for the convention.

At the end of the march Dostie climbed the steps of City Hall and gave an impromptu speech: “Now friends, go home peaceably, quietly; make no noise; disturb no person; but I learn that there are prowling bands of armed men out to waylay you,” Dostie warned. “If you are insulted by any of these bands of men, pay no attention to them. Go home right by them without saying a word to them; but if they strike you,” Dostie concluded, “Kill them.”
Before the convention Dostie was warned that New Orleans police and white mobs planned to attack delegates to the convention and their supporters. He said, “I know they want to take my life, but I think it is a good cause to die in.”

A.P. Dostie was one of the many people who were killed or wounded (37 dead—three white and 34 black—and 146 wounded—17 white and 119 black) in the Race Riot of July 30, 1866. But let this go on record: he was white and he died so that maybe blacks’ voices would be heard and taken into account.

So if you are reading this don’t forget to go vote!!!
P.B.S. PINCHBACK THE HONORARY

Schdawn Copelin, McDonogh 35 High School

P.B.S. Pinchback, born Pickney Benton Stewart Pinchback, was a freed slave and the son of a Mississippi white planter. Pinchback, a Republican and union soldier, made his way to Louisiana during the civil war, where during the Reconstruction era he was elected lieutenant governor and later served as governor for six weeks. His political career later included election to the House of Representatives and the United States Senate. He is recognized for this as well as more, but this is not why I recognize Pinchback as a contributor to the Reconstruction.

Although Pinchback could pass for white and live as one among them, he chose not to. He used his advantage to further help blacks get equality among the whites. Pinchback’s color of course contributed to his achievements that in turn helped us.

Pinchback once served in the Union and soon was the only officer left among all other qualified blacks. This was mainly because of his skin color. Realizing this, he did not want his skin color to determine his rank, so he left.

Although his skin color said otherwise, Pinchback was a true African American. He spent his life contributing to the empowerment of blacks, and I truly respect that. After reading about Pinchback, I asked myself whether or not my skin color determined how far I have gotten and whether or not my achievements are true or flukes. I hope they’re not, because I feel as though I earned my achievements, and I want to be accepted for me and not for my pale-colored skin and in Pinchback’s case smooth hair also.

P. B. S. Pinchback is honorable for this and more and for his involvement in black empowerment and for paving the road for blacks following decades after!
The Crusader, a Republican newspaper founded by attorney Louis Martinet in 1889, informed people about public issues. The articles spoke out against racial injustice. These stories ranged from reports on a white gang that terrorized the colored Bethlehem Lutheran Church to the incident when a group of laborers were harassed near Oakridge, La, leaving seven workers dead and six wounded.

Although The Crusader was a serious paper, it often made its points through grim humor, as in the following report.

“Last week in Fayette County, Ga, eight Negroes were killed and six were wounded. Eight whites were shot, but only one fatally. However deplorable these affrays, it is refreshing to see the Negro defending himself, but he must learn to shoot straight.”

The main event that inspired this historic newspaper’s fight against the loss of rights, protection, and equality was the signing of the Separate Car Act in 1890. Articles on the fight against this law appeared in virtually every issue.

This Act separated the passengers by race into a certain coach or compartment on the train. If a passenger did not obey this law, he or she would be fined twenty-five dollars.

The Crusader was the first newspaper to voice its opinions about the Separate Car Act. The Crusader even published public speeches against the Act such as the July 8, 1890 speech by one of the Louisiana Senate’s last black senators of the period immediately following Reconstruction.

The Crusader was known nationally. Famous public figures such as Albion Tourgee would often comment on the paper’s contributions to the struggle for civil rights.

Tourgee, the lead lawyer in the Plessy vs Ferguson case, wrote these words in a letter to U.S. Sen. William Chandler: “It was The Crusader which set on foot the movement to test the constitutionality of the Jim Crow car law.”
By 1894 *The Crusader*, still based in New Orleans, became the only black daily paper in the country and the only Republican daily paper in the South. In order to convert *The Crusader* into a daily paper, the printers and laborers agreed to work for half pay. The editors worked for free and rotated editorial duties.

These partial wages and voluntary work arrangements were only two of the many sacrifices that were made in order for *The Crusader* to become a daily paper. Publisher Louis Martinet gave up a $1,200 annual stipend for three years to study in Europe. The President of the United States awarded this prestigious and substantial fellowship to Martinet in honor of his work on the newspaper and for civil rights.

Martinet refused the fellowship despite the enormous physical and financial stress caused by his work. He felt his place was with *The Daily Crusader*.

In 1896, following the decision of the U. S. Supreme Court that the Separate Car Act was legal, *The Daily Crusader* ceased publication. It would be almost sixty years of struggle, sacrifice, and organizing before the segregation made legal in the Separate Car Act and the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision would be overturned in the case of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. 
The date was June 7, 1892. It was a sunny Tuesday afternoon, when mama sent me to make groceries. As I walked down the road I repeated in my mind, “milk, bread, sausage, and sugar,” over and over again so I wouldn’t forget. My reciting was distracted, when I noticed the bright red train signals blinking on and off. The train was just sitting there, and I knew I had to wait. So I sat down on the ground and made my name out of some rocks.

With my head to the ground, I saw the shiniest pair of shoes walk past me. I knew exactly who it was. It was Mr. Homer. He always had the best looking shoes in the neighborhood, because he was a shoemaker.

Before I looked up I saw another pair of shoes that weren’t so nice walking behind Mr. Homer. I looked up and saw Mr. Homer with his hands behind his back and handcuffs tightly on his wrist. The other pair of shoes was a man in a dark blue suit. Mr. Homer looked down at me with a weird expression on his face. He winked his eye at me as he always did, and I watched as they took him away.

I stood there for a while. I was confused. Mr. Homer was the nicest man you could ever meet. He wouldn’t hurt anyone. So, why would he be arrested on the train?

The train started to move backwards and then Forewords again. I walked to the grocery, and I got the items momma told me to get.

A couple of days later walking home from school, I passed Mrs. Louise’s house. Mrs. Louise lived in one of the shotgun houses on my street. All the houses were painted the same color, a dull green, but Mrs. Louise’s house was different. She had a little garden next to her step. She always kept some chairs in the alley for when her friends stopped by. She and three other women were sitting on her front porch talking. She leaned back in her old wooden chair with The Crusader newspaper in her hand and said, “that man, he was only trying to get us black folk equal treatment.”
I was a little girl, only twelve years old, and I didn’t quite understand what was going on. I walked along the brick cobblestone sidewalk to get to her porch. I sat on her step listening to them talk about how people in this organization called the Citizens’ Committee gathered together to plan to have Mr. Homer arrested.

I stared down at the bricked sidewalk. My eyes fastened to the green sponge-like grass that pushed its way up through the cracks between the bricks. While I continued to listen, I turned to catch Mrs. Louise’s eyes, and with my eyes I asked a question “may I?” as I pointed to the newspaper.

Without interrupting her conversation she nodded, and I eased the newspaper from her lap. I read that the man in the dark blue suit was Private Detective Cain. I thought to myself, “why would Mr. Homer, a shoe maker, risk getting arrested?”

Later on that evening after eating supper mama and I sat down on the floor to do some arithmetic. My mind was not on counting how many dirt rocks were on the floor. Instead I wondered why Mr. Homer volunteered to be arrested.

I interrupted mama and asked, “why would somebody get arrested on purpose?”

“Child what are you talking about?”

I explained to her what I saw two days ago. She began to tell me that she and some other women in her women’s club, the ladies of St. Joseph, had given money to support him getting arrested.

“Why would you do that?”

“You see baby, we cannot eat, shop, sit, or live among white folks, and it is not right. So people in the community rallied together to raise money to pay for the legal fees for Homer Plessy’s case.”

“What case?”

“Oh child, there is going to be a big case behind this.”

“Behind what?”

“Behind us not being able to sit on the same train car as a white person, and we all trying to get to the same place.”

“So we breaking the law?”
I never thought I would see the day that mama would say it was alright to break the law. She always taught us to abide by the law. Her motto was always “put it in the hands of the Lord, and he’ll take care of it,” but not this time. Maybe she thought they were just trying to help the Lord.

She explained to me that things were getting bad. People were dying. Families were starving because they could not get good jobs, to make groceries. She was getting upset, and she started crying. She said, weeping, “we have to do something or we will never get anywhere in this world.”

So I guess a lot of folks felt the way that mama did and wanted to see things change. I started to understand why we broke the law. It was for our own good.

“So, what can I do to help?”

“First of all you need to pray. We need prayer. You could also come along to the rallies at the churches and participate and listen. You need to learn all you can about what’s going on, but I don’t want you to get too involved, because you’re just a little girl.”

Mama looked at me with a strange smile.

“Child, why do you want to be involved with this?”

“Well, mama you know how I hate to see people, especially colored people, go to jail when they really didn’t do anything wrong. You remember when we went by Grandpa Lloyd’s house and we saw a man get arrested and beaten because a white woman said he raped her? It’s not fair, and I want to help in any way I can, even if it means breaking the law. Because we are breaking the law for a good reason, right mama?”

“Yes, child.”
On May 31, 1923, James Fortier and his fellow school board members all stared down at James F. Browne standing in the middle of the floor. They had just finished listening to Browne’s argument for social equality of the races. One statement stuck in their minds: “The fact of being white or black [is] merely an artificial distinction.”

Fortier, a strong supporter of segregation, wanted to make sure Browne did not remain a teacher at McDonogh 35 High School. The other board members had arrived at the meeting willing to let him remain in the classroom, if he agreed to no longer speak out for social equality. But Browne had to stand up for his beliefs.

How did Browne get in this predicament? He had started a newspaper, *The New Orleans Bulletin*, that argued against the Jim Crow laws of his city and state. In one issue, he argued, “social equality is freeborn, recognizing no artificial distinction and lives wherever Christ is found.”

Fortier apparently got a hold of this newspaper, suspended Browne from his teaching job, and wanted to hear what the teacher/activist had to say.

In private, after the hearing and away from James Browne’s ears, the board members all agreed with Fortier that “such utterances as Browne has made to persons easily led and deluded would foment trouble of a most serious nature.” They voted unanimously to fire him.

This vote was supposed to put fear into the black teachers and convince them that white teachers were superior. But in the next decade the black teachers had formed a union (American Federation of Teachers Local 527) and formed an organization with fellow community members to demand that black teachers be paid the same as white teachers.
Today I learned an interesting fact about Jelly Roll Morton. I am always interested in reading about jazz musicians, especially because I am an 8th grade public school student in New Orleans who is working to become a jazz musician. So while reading an essay from *The Long Ride*, a book written by New Orleans Public School students who are participating in the Students at the Center writing program, a section on Jelly Roll Morton caught my eye. This New Orleans jazz composer and pianist had a long campaign against A.S.C.A.P. (the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers). He believed that this organization was being racist, for in 1934 it would not let him join, and there were only two black musicians among its 200 charter members. Jelly Roll wanted to join so he could claim his royalties that were due to him because his music was being played on the radio without his consent. But Morton died in 1940, a few months before his case was finally brought to court.

Twenty years later, a federal court forced A.S.C.A.P. to revise its practices, pushing the organization closer to the racial justice that Morton had struggled for.

After reading this, I thought a lot about this world and how jazz musicians fit in and how most people think about them. From what I can tell, many people think that jazz musicians are malevolent drug addicts who mistreat women. I hear these comments and even know where some of it comes from. But I also know there’s much more to jazz musicians than the bad things some of them may have done and the great music they’ve created. I recently read a book that shows all these different complexities: *So What*, a biography of trumpeter Miles Davis that was written by John Szwed. I myself am a jazz musician, and I believe that those people need to see that jazz musicians are more than the negative stereotypes. These musicians are intelligent men and women who strive to master their craft. And they all make history.

So I came up with an idea that may solve this stereotyped classification of jazz musicians. If there were a music education class that could be
added on to the band class that is already in public schools, the class could teach young students how their favorite musicians and recording artists are making history, and how they are contributing to making this world a more multi-racial place. My friends and I would like to read and study more about people who are like us—and like we want to be.
For years I’ve heard pieces of the story that supposedly gave me my last name. Before the first time that I was told that I wasn’t originally an O’Connor, I believed I was a descendent of the famous first female jurist of the U. S. Supreme Court, Sandra Day. I had also thought of my family as unique to carry a name that wasn’t ordinary. However, after finding out how I truly got my last name, I realized I was no different from any other person in America whom justice chose to ignore.

Supposedly the Roberts, my original family, stayed in a small town located in Tennessee throughout the 1800’s. From my understanding it was a very big family all brought up in church and taught to cook very well. My great grandfather Joseph was the youngest and apparently most stubborn. Anyways, when all the other boys in the Roberts family were getting black women to settle down and have children with, Joe wanted something a little different. He had found himself a white girl whom he was so crazy about that he just had to have her.

Eventually after making bold plays at her to express the feelings he had, she obliged and gave into him. But when asked about it, she said she had been raped and that the person responsible was a black boy named Joe. This accusation spread around the town so quickly that every white person in Tennessee wanted to get their hands on Joe. The first thing Joe’s father told him to do was run. And though running was something he had no intention of doing, there was absolutely no way he could stay there and live. So after a long time ducking out, Joe decided to leave. But it was a little too late. Two white men had found out where he was hiding and had no intentions of letting him see daylight. So what did he do? He did what I would have done and killed the two men, who had just attempted to beat his cousin to death after they saw him with Joe.

After this occurred, Joe supposedly went home and kissed his family goodbye, not telling them about what had just went down. They asked where he was going, and he simply replied, “To find myself.”

Though there were many places for he and his cousin to go, they chose New Orleans, I guess to symbolize his “new” life that they both were
excited to start. He knew that by leaving his family in Tennessee after committing such a brutal crime, he would probably never see them again. However, he understood that by staying, his whole family would have been in danger. He also understood that though he would be in another city that it still wouldn’t stop the fact that he was a wanted man. This is what forced him to change his last name from Roberts to O’Connor.

My great grandfather eventually settled down with a French woman and had children. To remember his seven siblings whom he would never be able to see again, he named every one of his children after one of them. He later became a minister to finish off his new life the right way. But he never forgot the things or the family he had in his old life.

To this day I wonder about how it would have been if Joe never came to New Orleans and met my great grandma to eventually have my grandfather whom I look up to and think about every day. If it weren’t for Joe, my family would be non-existent and the name I am so proud of wouldn’t be mine. Knowing that O’Connor isn’t my original name makes me want to cherish it, because it signifies the new start of my family and so many others like mine. But it also makes me sad that Joe had to drop the name of his family because of something that didn’t go so far. I’m just happy that he was brave enough to go through with it.
A. P. TUREAUD
Tiffany Morgan, Frederick Douglass High School

Everybody has heard of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Harriet Tubman. But what about the small people in the background who did big things? No great thing happens without a lot of small people. We should all remember that—especially students who think they can’t change things.

One person who is not as well known as he should be is Alexander Pierre Tureaud. He does have a street named after him and a statue right where the street runs into St. Bernard Ave., between N. Claiborne and N. Galvez. People who drive by that statue should know that A. P. Tureaud was a well-read man who was from New Orleans. He received a law degree from Howard University in 1925. After college, he returned to New Orleans and became an attorney for the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He encouraged many blacks to register and vote.

In addition to all the small things, Tureaud is famous for the 1941 case, McKelpin v. the Board of Education. This successful suit forced the school board to pay black teachers the same salary it paid white teachers. This event may not be as famous as Rosa Parks’ refusal to sit or Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. But it probably helped black professionals earn the sort of living that pushed them to greater activism and more equal treatment. Tureaud also fought the local school board in 1949. That case, Bush v. Board of Education, eventually led to the desegregation of the New Orleans public school system.

These are some of the small steps that were really big and necessary. We don’t hear much about these cases today. We should keep digging deeper. There’s a long chain of small actions that made the strength of freedom. Without Tureaud’s work, where would someone else we never heard of, like Dr. Raphael Cassimere, be in his freedom fight. Dr. Cassimere played his own big, small part in the movement to desegregate buses. As a young boy riding the bus, he decided to turn around an insulting sign that ordered blacks to the back of the bus. He did not want to see the words, “For Colored Patrons Only.” From here he became more and more
of an activist, leading the youth chapter of the New Orleans NAACP during the integration demonstrations of the 1960’s.

Let’s learn about and remember all these people. And take our own big, small steps.
“...The big difference between you and me in this fight for rights is that I am not afraid to die for a principle and you are.”

Mr. Ernest Wright was concluding his speech. His face showed anger as he faced 2,000 people from the podium stand in the center of Shakespeare Park. The air was charged as the people started realizing what Mr. Wright had just said. Many showed disapproval and resentment because he voiced the truth of the majority of the people listening.

Ernest Wright, being a good speaker, did not pause for comment but kept going to drive his nail deeper and deeper. “I am not afraid to go to jail for a principle and you are. What we need is 10,000 unafraid men as members with their money paid who are unafraid to present themselves for jobs to which they are entitled. We can’t get anywhere by being afraid. Let’s stand in our own shoe leather. Walk ye like men.”

Thus concluding, Mr. Wright lowered the loud speaker to chest level and looked over the crowd, his last statement settling into the ears of the gathered crowd. Then there was applause.

The applause resonated through time 64 years to my ears as I stood on the soft grass of Shakespeare Park. I felt the brisk morning air chilling my bones, a reminder of the forgotten and unknown organizers and people. And the park on Sunday empty of all activity.
THE NEGRO LEAGUE GOES CUBAN

Ashley Jones, McDonogh 35 High School

“Look at that boy go! Running toward second, making it safe with the slide.”

“That’s some star player. How’d you get him to join the league?”

The thin lips of white owners wonder. Sucking on Cuban cigars, looking through the cloud-like smoke at the newly sold black boy, sliding through the haze of dust.

“I told him we were bigger, better; we can make a black hero out of him.”

And with every slide home their pockets swelled. Jackie became both a trophy and a target, praised in the midst of hummed baseballs and spitballs stinging his cheek.

And with every slide home, less fortunate black men burned their gloves and caps along with the peanut and cotton candy sellers’ red and white sailor caps, refreshment carts and freshly pressed white aprons. Burned them with the hopes they had of helping a league, a business made for and run by them.

Yet, he was and remains our hero. Boy I would have liked to see him play, blue cap snug on his head, black nostrils flaring under the sun, what a sight.

The real sight would have been to see Assata Shakur up there. Her afro sticking through the sides of a blue Dodgers cap, black medallion in the shape of Africa hanging loosely around her neck.

I would have loved to see some white boy spit in her face.

Would she have become a hero if she and her black panther buddies threatened to shut the stadium down, building their own, giving the peanut and the water boy a chance to regain economic status?

Or would she have been beaten and chained to a hospital bed, the way she was in 1971, simply for riding the New Jersey turnpike?
Would she have become Rookie of the Year if she hurled back balls of hate that were thrown at her head?

It’s funny how some of our heroes are praised for their silent courage in the face of cruelty and racism, while others are imprisoned and never ever heard of, even though they spend their lives screaming for justice, and often times getting kicked out of the game.
I remember being in second grade at Patch Elementary in Stuttgart, Germany. Ms. Thompson began the class by explaining that it was Black History month. Clearing her throat, she started to tell a story about a civil rights activist. She said his name was Martin Luther King Jr. She selected me to read aloud a speech that he had written entitled “I Have a Dream.”

The words didn’t really resonate. How could they? I had spent the majority of my childhood in Europe and had no connection to the Jim Crow south. Sure I was one of only five African Americans in my class, and Ms. Thompson was the only black teacher at my school, but the closest I had ever gotten to any type of “Movement” was putting up yellow ribbons in hope of peace during Desert Storm/Shield. I witnessed families like my own being torn apart by war, unaware that only a few decades earlier families in the South had experienced similar hardships due to racism.

Until recently I was never able to make a connection between my own life and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I had studied King’s views on integration and equality, but I was never taught that King lived during a time of war or that he took a stand against the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, even though I could identify with that. Many of the organizations with which King was associated discouraged him from taking public positions on foreign affairs. King spoke openly about his disdain saying, “The Negro must not allow himself to become a victim of the self-serving philosophy of those who manufacture war that the survival of the world is the white man’s business alone.” Following his anti-war declaration, King was abandoned and consequently labeled a threat by some people who once supported him.

To truly celebrate Dr. King’s legacy we must acknowledge both his popular and unpopular decisions and commemorate his life through our own fights for social justice. I know from experience how easy it is to be blinded by one’s own good fortunes. It wasn’t until I became actively involved with the impoverished community surrounding my
inner-city school that my eyes were opened. When I recognized the systemic root of my people’s condition, I became angry and saw the need for change.

Realizing the need for change and actually taking action are quite different. Here is where we must emulate Dr. King by giving our time, energy, knowledge and, in his case, our lives for the benefit of the whole.

In an effort to positively affect my community, I volunteer at a school that has been labeled “academically unacceptable.” I teach radio production to eighth graders. We discuss oppression, exploitation and stereotypes and use the understanding of these concepts to build foundations for the social commentaries the students write. Now I can give these kids what I was deprived of in second grade: knowledge of the social injustices that cripple us and encouragement to challenge the system.

“How long will prejudice blind the visions of men? How long? Not long! Because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long! Because you shall reap what you sow.” Today King’s words ring more true to me than ever.
DOWN TO THE RIVER OF DRYADES AND CLAIBORNE AVENUES: A Tribute to Jerome Smith
Towana Pierre, McDonogh 35 High School

Purple and marigold feathers
Caress brilliantly luminous
Obsidian cheeks.
Beads glitter like precious
Gems on sparkling turquoise
Headdresses.
Majestic white crowns
Reach imperiously to
The heavens.
Wonder-filled eyes peer
From between jean-clad
Legs.
Vibrant colors dance
In hazel pools as
Tootie Montana's
Melodic chants penetrate
Chocolate souls.
Jerome's tiny feet follow along the
Time-worn banks of the
Sultry Mississippi.
Follow down Dryades to fight for integration.
Follow to the ivory guarded
Countertops where pale eyes
Shoot ice-coated daggers.
Follow to the palatial meccas of
Education where the haves prosper
And the have-nots perish.
Follow to teach the children
and make Freedom Summer last for decades.
Follow to keep culture alive
even when concrete swallows trees.
Follow to lead.
MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON
Charles Johnson, Frederick Douglass High School

Jerome Smith strode to the White House in his faded denim overalls. He walked up the White House steps slowly, passing men in suits everywhere, not knowing what to expect or what was going to happen in today’s meeting. When he entered the house, he wiped the salty sweat from his forehead with an old handkerchief he had in his pocket. He looked around for James Baldwin, who had set up this meeting with one of the Kennedys. Bystanders may have mistaken him for a child that was lost in the Nile Valley. In reality, though, Smith was simply a young man who felt he should not have to dress any special way to impress government officials.

Baldwin approached Jerome after he was through talking with some congressmen in a room filled with different businessmen who held important positions. Baldwin, a small man with an energetic step and a winking smile, paused to let Smith finish his conversation. Smith had stopped to speak with a white-haired custodian who was sweeping the floor, her back bent forward from years of bending and lifting. Baldwin knew such conversation was important to Jerome, who believed he owed the average worker as much respect—probably more—as he would give to a president or senator. Finally Baldwin and Smith shook hands. Baldwin thanked him for coming to the meeting and asked about the sit-ins and picketing that were still going on in New Orleans and across Louisiana and Mississippi.

Jerome paused suddenly in the conversation. The men in suits caught his eye as if they were a fine chocolate woman with thick thighs. These men caught his eyes because he felt as if he was being watched by a hawk in the sky. Heads turned to see a young man not wearing a suit and tie for an important meeting. But for Jerome, this meeting was no more important than a soap opera that is watched on a daily basis.

Baldwin interrupted Smith’s glare and escorted him to the meeting room. Everyone in the waiting area returned to their conversations as Baldwin and Smith walked up the lightly waxed wooden stairs. The meeting took place May 24, 1963. Baldwin organized the meeting.
because there was a need to discuss black alienation and the role the
government should play in making sure America lived up to the words
of its democratic promise. He had addressed some of these issues in
“Letter from a Region in My Mind,” an essay published by The New Yorker.

When Baldwin and Smith entered the room filled with congressmen
and Attorney General Robert Kennedy (the president’s brother), Smith
took his seat as if he were at home. In fact, Smith wished he were back
in New Orleans. The only reason he had come up north was to see a
specialist who could help him deal with the head injury he suffered
when he was beaten simply for asking for fair and equal treatment for
all citizens.

The meeting continued for a little while. Smith grew more and more
impatient with too much polite talking that he knew came against
a background of no action. Baldwin, recognizing Smith’s impatience,
tried to direct the conversation towards Smith. His large, frog-like eyes
and his writer’s ear for all sides of a situation let him know that the
meeting was not working for Smith and that Kennedy better listen
soon or not at all. Realizing that Smith had willingly gone through
extreme pain for his cause and wanting to prove a point to Kennedy,
Baldwin asked Smith if he would consider going to war for his country.

Smith leaped out of his chair and shouted, “Never! Never! Never!”
Everyone in the room was stunned and quiet as Jerome picked up the
chair he had knocked down. The men had already eyed cautiously the
young man with informal dress, intense eyes, and a heavily bandaged
head. He actually looked like a soldier hero home from the war. In
fact, that’s what he was. But instead of fighting for the government in
Vietnam, he was fighting for the people in McComb, Mississippi. That
was where he had had his head bashed in.

Once he started speaking, Smith did not stop easily. The polite talk had
been too much for him, especially given what he had fought through
in the Deep South. These men seemed unaware of the situation. They
had no sense of urgency. Smith did, though. He raised his voice like
someone giving a speech to factory workers, not someone sitting
around a conference table. Jerome spoke with anger when he described
two white boys and how they beat him.

As the meeting continued to almost three hours, the pacifist, Ghandian
Smith interrupted the meeting one last time. He stated in a tired voice
that he was nauseated to have been at this meeting. In slow, measured
tones, he said that more than the beatings by white racists, this
meeting had given him a strong urge to renounce his non-violence. If being beaten, watching co-workers murdered were not enough to move these officials to act, what would?

Smith then directed his comments directly to Robert Kennedy. He questioned Kennedy’s manhood. He wondered how his wife could even be with a man who would assume such a position of power and responsibility and not do all in his power to end the terrorism and injustice that raged across our land and was supported by leaders. He claimed that a real man would have himself and his children on the front lines. Instead of sending them to some separate school, they should be right there, learning shoulder to shoulder with poor black children — if not in Mississippi then at least right here in Washington, D. C.

With that Smith left the meeting. Baldwin, listening intently like all good writers do, knew for sure that if justice did not come soon, next time would come fire.
Every Sunday I attended the same church, St. Maria Goretti Catholic Church. And every Sunday it was the same sermon. “Stay in God’s good grace. It is unholy for a man to lay with another man; this is not how God wanted it to be.” It seemed like that was all they talked about, and they always made me cry, because I didn’t want to hurt my loved ones or go to Hell.

One day I heard one of my friends from the club talk about this church that was hot. I asked what exactly was he talking about. He replied the Upstairs Lounge. He said it was a church that didn’t judge you and accepted you for who you are. It was really come as you are. So I spent the night by my friend’s house and told my mom I was going to be going with his mom and dad to his church, and they would bring me home. I wish I didn’t lie to her.

Oh My God…

That service was poppin. The choir was great, and the pastor was awesome. I even met a cute boy who really had something going for himself. After the service that Sunday evening, June 24, 1973, Reverend William Lawson finished his sermon at the Upstairs Lounge (above the Jimani) and was socializing with his mostly gay congregation. Services were held here in the bar each Sunday, because the church lacked the funds for a building of its own. Down at the street level someone opened the door to the narrow passage leading to the lounge, lit a Molotov cocktail and threw it onto the stairs. Then this person shut the door and pad-locked it. I tried to open it, but I couldn’t.

The passage was quickly engulfed in flames, but it was contained because the bottom door was locked and the door to the room at the top of the stairs was shut. Then someone opened the door at the top of the stairs. The oxygen-starved fire tore through the room, igniting everything in its path. 29 people died in the next 16 minutes.

20 people escaped through the back and along some roof tops, but most of the patrons were trapped. Many died instantly in the initial flash fire, but some tried escaping through the windows. They were barred.
Reverend Lawson was one of the victims, trapped half in and out of the blazing building, lodged between the bars of a window.

I managed to escape but the reverend, my friend, and the cute boy didn’t. I saw their faces screaming for help. There was nothing I could do but look like a coward. Sometimes I feel responsible, but I knew that God wouldn’t leave me. I know that my friend wants this story to be told, and he, along with all 32 who died that day, lives on through this story. The Jimani Lounge, at 141 Chartres Street in New Orleans, was the site of a horrific mass murder. It is now one of the most haunted locations in the French Quarter. And the story will live on.
LEGACY:
In Honor of Tom Dent
Towana Pierre, McDonogh 35 High School

Honey coated lies slip seamlessly through time’s decrepit hands.

Great poets writhe in the void of the gospel, or history, as we know it.

Tom’s night dreams flit in the shadow of broken lessons.

His incantations fall hollowly, skimming the bourbon-coated streets of his Danny Barker haunted fantasies.

Enchanted calls of capitalism beckon chocolate hearts, drowning Etheridge’s belly song in the silence of a private prison bar slam.

Green grass browns in the shade of yellow balloons. Nothing to phone home about. Just another broken spirit.

Asha Bandele’s prayer for the living falls on deaf ears of long-locked warriors whose eyes are glazed over by nature’s painkillers. They gaze in blank adoration on token items of the revolution. Kente cloth, How to Get Dreaded Fast manuals, on sale now.

Chancellor Williams reflects on the vision of sun-kissed warriors bathing in the glow of ceremonial fires. Sand invades palatial civilizations with blood-hungry conquerors intent on plundering the earth’s womb.

Yet, behind feathered masks of nonchalance, the ancestors live on, crouching in the crevices of glass-strewn avenues, watching from seemingly sinister skies over neighborhoods set on self-destruction.

The spirits of the old rise in a deafening mantra, trailing silky strands of pride and confidence into our sub consciousness.

And, on the breeze lingers the lone whisper, “Legacy.”
DEDICATED TO THE BLACK CHILDREN OF THIS QUOTE UNQUOTE AMERICA

Adonise Dupree, McDonogh 35 High School

Young, Black, Bald and Bold
The Ghettofied Auctioneer
The Realness
Tupac Shakur
Yeah he called you a Bitch
Cussed ya mama and fucked ya sista
With his Thug Life Mentality
He saved a life
Guided a boy and spoke the Truths
The Truths
Of BLACK Realities
The Drugs, Money, Gurls, Niggas, Sistas, Brothers, Aunts, Uncles, Cousins, Nieces, Nephews
The Luv
The Joy
The Hate
The Pain
The deaths and the new identities
The realness
Positive or Negative
Tupac Shakur
No Illusions Attached
Just the lyrics of the great Ghettofied Auctioneer

Who spoke of me

The young black child looking for an outside source A partner a friend someone who’s been there done that experienced what I’ve experienced

My pains, struggles, crises, and emotional meltdowns. Knew what it was like to have lights turned out

No food on the table

Mama’s crying Daddy’s hollering while I’m lying under the bed praying for a better day

Now my brother was strong

Listening to his mama

But

The Money, Gurls, and Drugs were calling

The THUG LIFE the GANSTA LIFE

I Don’t Give a Fuck attitude took over his life

And he became my man, my boy, my brother

Tupac Shakur

So yeah he may have been ya Boy, Brother, Friend or even Enemy

But he was and still is the greatest rapper of all time

There is no comparison he was the Original

The Alpha and Omega of rap

The one and only

Tupac Shakur
Flipping through the pages of an old family scrapbook, I see pages filled with past Mardi Gras snapshots. There are old, discolored pictures of Mardi Gras Indians and a section filled with people dressed as clowns. I didn’t know any of these faces and began to wonder why they were in my family’s scrapbook.

Flipping back to the section with the unknown clowns, I asked, “Daddy, who are these people?”

He let out a few chuckles and replied, “This is your family.”

“Oh, . . .”, I said, giving him that tell-me-more look.

“Meat, this was a long time ago, before you were even thought of. One Mardi Gras, me and your momma made those clown suits for all the kids in the family.”

He lifted the plastic cover and removed a few pictures from the pages.

“You see. There is Dexter, Vincent, Nelly, Angel, and Lika. Look, there is Nettie and your momma and Vanessa. That was one of the best Mardi Gras’s ever. Boy, did it take some time to make those suits, but we did it for those children. They loved it. Little L and D clowns walking the streets of New Orleans. . . .”

As my daddy began reminiscing on that Mardi Gras, I began to flip the pages. As I flipped through, my dad abruptly placed his hand on a picture of a man wearing an orange Indian suit. His mouth was wide open like a roaring lion. Both hands were raised, and one foot was lifted. It was sort of scary looking. A sudden outburst came from the left.

“Fi ya ya, who got that fiya... Aaaaaaaaal! Wild boy coming through. Make way. Make way.”

My dad began saying these chants and moving his arms like he was at a tribal ceremony.

“Who is this?” I asked.

“Girl, that’s me. You can’t tell? I’m wild boy, 7th ward wild boy!”
As he danced and chanted, I laughed hysterically. He really looked like a true Navajo Indian, like he should be dancing around a campfire worshipping Mother Earth. My daddy went on to tell me how he masked for the Downtown Indians with Tootie Montana. He said the most exciting part was roaming the streets of the 7th ward tapping his tambourine and chanting.

As I watched my dad put on his show, I received a small history lesson. I learned that black folks began to mask Indian as a way of honoring folks who were native to the Louisiana and New Orleans area and in the 18th century assisted enslaved Africans who had escaped and were working as the original freedom fighters, conducting slave revolts and establishing independent black communities and preserving African cultural traditions, all with some assistance from Native Americans.

As my daddy traveled down memory lane, this scrapbook came alive. He brought the pictures to life by telling the stories and reliving every moment.

Looking through the scrapbook with my daddy was very important to me. Even though my pedigree doesn’t trace back to maroon colony leader Juan Malo or the NAACP’s attorney A. P. Tureaud, I realized the importance of Mardi Gras to our family—and the importance of us honoring our ancestors who fought for freedom and those who helped them. It was a beat that could be found in every family member. The excitement, the culture, the atmosphere, everything about Mardi Gras throbs in our souls. The beat is so strong. If you walk past that scrapbook today, you might be able to hear it. “Fi ya ya!”
TO KELVIN,
Keva Carr, Frederick Douglass High School

There were no limits at all to the things you did.
You were my cousin, when I was a confused little kid.
I could picture you in the jail cell holding on to the bars.
Picturing the grass, hearing the cars,
I remember you, braids to the back, head with the hood, caramel skin.
Girls would say "Is that your cousin?" I would say "Who, him?"
I only visited you twice, and those two times I went I can not even remember when.
I remember your mama taking off her jewelry.
I remember walking through beepers, seeing all the security.
I want you to know that I’m doing okay.
I think about you often, but I’m going to be straight.
I know you’re yearning for the family, cause you have none in there.
I know you’re yearning for our laughs as we sometimes cry tears for you.
I think about your laugh with the crazy things you used to do.
Some people say that you are safe,
That this world is getting worse with violence and hate.
Was that what got you in, jealousy within?
Violent temper or hate in the heart, damn, you away is getting me pissed off.
I don’t even have one picture of you in my photo book, “You hear me?”
I know you can’t, but in reality I’m screaming at you.
Christmas, Thanksgiving, grandma’s birthday just keep passing around.
Damn, Kelvin, I wish you were around.
Come rap with me, joke with me, laugh with me, what?
Yeah I see you the type of boy that had to be different, yep that was you.
The type that had to be jolly, on his toes, a busy body.
Now I close my letter, but not my heart.
You will always be my dawg, my boy, my cousin Kelvin, holla?

Keva Carr, a 2005 graduate of the Students at the Center program at Frederick Douglass Senior High School in New Orleans, shared this poem in a workshop presented with her teachers and classmates at the 2003 Critical Resistance South conference. In the session, she explained to the group that she had sent this and other writings to her cousin, who is incarcerated in one of Louisiana’s youth prisons. Most of the writings she has sent, including this one, have been returned to her, never having been read by her cousin.
Dear George,

When we first met you in 2003, who knew it would turn out to be this way? No lie, when I first saw you talking to Keisha, I was like “oh no,” but then I got to know you. I specifically remember the time you came up behind me and kissed me because you thought I was Keisha. I laughed it off, because I knew you still hadn’t got used to telling my twin and me apart. After that, I realized you were a cool lil’ dude, and you had a swagger like no other. And you were supposed to be Jacai’s Godfather, so why did you leave? I know you are the one whom he looks up at and bursts out laughing at, and I know you’re his guardian angel.

Well, George, you know I loved you like a brother. Keisha still talks about you every day. You guys were so in love. Your friends still say, “George know he loved him some Keisha.” Even though we used to have our disagreements, we always had each other’s backs. You went through problems like feeling as though no one cared or not being able to have a steady home, so I used to always pray for you. We all cared. That’s why we were always there.

It had been two years, and we had gotten used to having you around. Every single day, Keisha and I always talked about you and Shorty: How crazy ya’ll were, how ya’ll used to treat us, and the things ya’ll used to say. You especially used to have me joked out when you used to rib me. Even though your jokes were lame, we used to always fall out laughing at each other. And remember those parties we all used to go to on the weekend? You would dance to the bounce music either doing the 9th ward shuffle or wiggling your shoulders.

Even with all you were going through, you still managed to have fun. July 6, 2005, you came over to the house and Keisha, you, and I sat down and watched Hide and Seek. I still laugh today thinking about how you were sitting there lying, telling Keisha you had Leukemia. I wanted to go and get some cookies ‘n’ cream ice cream out of the deep freezer, but I didn’t. I knew it was your favorite, and I didn’t want to share.

I went to bed early that night but was later awakened by the smell of the chocolate chip cookies you and Keisha were baking. Then I later
was awakened when Mark pulled up to come and get you. All I could hear was bass, and I was wishing you would hurry up so he could leave. July 7, 2005, the next day, at around quarter to six, you called Keisha on her cell phone to tell her you were walking on Claiborne with Quinney and Nashawn and yall were going by Jonathan’s house. We later sat down in the living room and we were, once again, talking about the clowns you and Shorty were. A few minutes later your auntie called crying, saying you had just been shot. We all frantically rushed to put clothes on to go to Charity Hospital, because we knew you were going to be okay. But then, your auntie called screaming and crying saying you were gone. We didn’t believe it. We thought it was just a misunderstanding. At least we prayed that’s what it was.

We stopped to pick up your mother and stepfather. My daddy pushed about 80 MPH trying to get to you. When I jumped out of the truck at about 8:39 p.m. and saw your body laying on the corner of St. Bernard and North Roman, I felt as though I couldn’t breathe, but all I could do was scream and cry. It really was you. Lying flat on your back with a bullet wound to the chest. Then, five or so minutes later your auntie walked up to us and told us Jonathan was dead around the corner. I can remember seeing him balled up on a drain, shot ten times including two bullets to the head. That really killed me inside.

When I called Shorty and told him what happened, it took him some time to jump into reality and realize you were gone. He even thought about naming our son after you, but I said no because George sounded too old fashioned. He still says that if he was there with you, you would still be here because “yall” would have, “bluesd that nigga.” The only thing I ask is that you be with him, because I don’t want him to end like you, just only that he brought it upon himself. One thing I loved so much about you was you didn’t mind taking a bullet for the ones you loved. You taking that bullet for Jonathan, Julian, and Quinney shows truly that you are not just a friend but a hero too.

The funeral was so sad. You and Jonathan looked so peaceful. I hoped you said your prayers before you left, and I hoped you liked the poem I read for “yall.” Don’t worry, we all still holding it down for yall. 7th ward bound! Now, everyone I see that’s getting killed has to leave behind loved ones.

I just want to let you know that the time you were here you helped me. When my relationship was going wrong, you let Shorty know what was real, or if someone was trying to do something, you were there to back
them off, and even when the day was boring, you brought life to it. We all miss you very much, and I still know you are here. One thing I’ve learned from you is to never worry about what people say about you: it’s uncontrollable. But, one thing you can control is how you react to it. I love you very much and thank you for letting me know that what I experience today will always help me tomorrow.

Love Your Favorite Sister,

Kenisha
BOYS ON THE BUS AND AT MCDONALD’S

Monique Hill, McDonogh 35 High School

It was the usual routine. After school, some friends and I walked to the bus stop and waited on the St. Bernard bus. The same faces were at the bus stop every day, and numerous cars passed by with music blaring. Boys beeped their horns hoping to get our attention, and others just gave long stares. We finally got on the bus and raced to the McDonald’s on Broad St. to get in the long food line. I was lagging behind this time because of Ms. Bamba’s huge Calculus book.

While I was trying to catch up with my friends, this cute boy approached me. He was wearing navy blue dickies with a white button down shirt. He told me that he went to Kennedy. He was brown skinned and kind of tall, with these twisty looking curls in his hair. He was especially well-dressed to say he was in uniform. Although he never asked my name, he insisted on calling me red, his own nickname for me without being polite enough to ask for my real name. He immediately asked for my number. No in-between talk, just straight to the point. Since he was rushing me, I hurried up and gave him the wrong number. Who was he going to ask for anyway, “Red?” I felt like if I didn’t deserve the time now, then he didn’t deserve the time later.

After smiling deviously I continued my journey to McDonald’s. I finally made it there, and my friends saved me a place in line. We all got our food and sat at a table by the window. While I enjoyed my crispy golden fries and gazed out of the window, a boy from John Mac approached the table.

“Excuse me for interrupting, but may I ask your name?”

I responded, and then he introduced himself. He stood and talked for about 10 minutes. It felt more like 10 seconds. It felt like I’d known him for years. We just talked about our schools and how they are different. He even joked around with my friends. I felt so comfortable I offered him a seat. I really didn’t get a good look at him, but when I did, I could see he wasn’t as cute as the other boy. It didn’t matter though. He could actually say that he knew who I was. I glanced out the window.
Fewer buses seemed to pass, because it was getting late. I almost hated to leave. I had so many questions to ask my new friend. I left him my number though; he didn’t even have to ask. We gave each other dap, and I left the restaurant to board the bus.

On the bus my cousin Kaelynn teased me. “Girl, I see you have made two new friends today.”

I laughed at her and said, “No I only made one.”

She looked at me and said, “I saw that cute boy from Kennedy talking to you.”

“It was just a misunderstanding. He thought I was some girl named Red.”
A POEM 4 ARTHUR

Ashley Jones, Students at the Center staff

I-55 accident leaves N.O. man dead
He was ejected from the windshield... hit by a car in left lane
then dragged 100 ft from scene

I spent the morning I found out you were dead rubbing my head,
Wondering if what I had accomplished in 22 years was enough for
Me to depart this life feeling free.

Reading the headline of your death all I could see
Was
Your eyes,
Big beautiful Sirius looking eyes that you
Kept hidden behind glasses during school,
So I really didn’t know they were beautiful
Until the day you walked into class with translucent
New contacts.

Arthur this is a poem for you and
Every other black boy I watched
Grow and die.

This is for my cousin Mike who at 19
Found himself shot dead in the head.
But he always wanted to be a gangsta,
So I know he’s smiling right now.

This is for Jonathan,
Childhood friend who
Overdosed at 15.

Rumor has it that heroin did it.
According to his family
“Mum’s the word.”
Arthur this is your poem, 
But it belongs to Ega too 
The good friend of my 
Best friend Smokey who found him, 
Ega, bleeding through the holes in his chest 
In his momma’s yard in a state of shock before 
He died—eyes wide open in broad daylight.

This is for Prince—Jamaican born king who hung 
On the block I lived on down the street from my 
College who used to call me wild hair gul. 

I didn’t find him on my block this year; 
He didn’t make it through the summer. 

This is a poem for black boys 
Who dream of being thug angels 
When they die, 
Hoping the hood they 
Find in heaven is better than 
The hell they endured on earth. 

Arthur this poem is yours. 

It is my thank you for having that 
Crush on me and 4 being too 
Much of a confidant to tell me so. 

Thank you for our last chance 
Meeting @ the store where 
You worked when you played 
Hide-n-go seek calling my name 
Behind the aisles. 

This is your Poem Arthur. 

It is my thanks for letting me see those melodic 
Brown eyes again. 
Thank you for giving me the final image of you 
As a man. 

Thank you for giving me in your death 
The will to live like I never have. 

Arthur this poem belongs to you.
And as you sped down that highway
Losing control of yourself I hope that
You weren’t scared.

And I hope that as your body shattered
The windshield and you began to soar
Through the air that those eyes
Caught sight of the brightest
Star.

And when in the moment your body finally
Descended back to earth that the whizzing by
Of cars did not distract you from finding
Peace in knowing that in death like in life
You are valuable.

And when you get up there Arthur,
Tell it to all the black boys who
Died without knowing it,

Because Arthur this poem is for you, but it’s theirs too.

MAY YOU ALL REST IN PEACE
WHY HIM?

Gabrielle Caine, Frederick Douglass High School

Sometimes they say you are not supposed to ask God any questions, but I just had to ask this one time only: “Why him lord, why him? Was he bad or was it just his time?”

November 23, 2006, at 6:00 in the morning my phone was ringing off the hook. I was thinking, “Should I answer it, or what?” It rang about 6 or 7 times before I answered. It was my best friend Tiffany. She said, “Gabrielle, are you sitting down?”

“What you think? I’m still sleep!”

“Man got killed.”

So I jumped up and said, “What Man?”

“Man who you used to talk to.”

I hung up the phone and started crying. I was not crying loud, but I was crying hard. I could not go back to sleep after that.

I went to thinking about all the good times we had like when we went to the show to see *Big Momma’s House 2*. I never saw him laugh the way he laughed at that movie.

But I also haven’t forgotten about the bad times. He was the type of boy who liked to fight, and that I did not like. That was the reason we did not date. Like one day I was inside, and he called and said he was on his way. I said ok and hung up the phone. Five minutes later I heard a knock on my door.

“It’s already open,” I yelled.

He came in and said, “What’s up” and lay on the bed. He was going to sleep. I was on the side of him on the phone with my friend Tiffany. Man heard me say, “Stop playing with me.” He thought I was on the phone with a boy. He took the phone out my hand and broke it in half. I tried to jerk it back, but it was too late because it was already broken. He pushed me back, so I ran back on him. We started fighting. I put him out my house and hollered, “Do not ever come back.”
Sometimes I wonder if God took Man off this earth because He did not want to see me with him. Did God know the type of boy Man was? And did He know I would always take him back once we finished fighting? Or did He think it was time for Man to get some rest, because he ran the streets too much.

I remained friends with him even though we had fights and fusses, because to me he was the most kind and friendly boy I knew. But now since he’s been gone, I wonder how younger girls so pretty can put up with boys who like to hit girls. I was in the blind at the time.

Man was not my boyfriend, but he was a close friend to me. He could be so nice to me, but when he got mad it wouldn’t be nice. People used to say he was bad, but I did not think so.

God still hasn’t answered my question, but I’m still asking, “Why him lord? Why him? Was he bad or was it just his time?”
“CURSE!”
Debbie Carey, Frederick Douglass High School

“Man look I ain’t gon’ beg nobody to be with me, cause if I had to, then I would know how you would feel.” Those were the last words I told him before I hung up. I thought that bitch would call back. He didn’t, so I guess I was right about me knowing how he felt.

“Man I want to make it official. You my baby?” He would ask me over and over on the phone when it came down to our little intimate sessions.

He would make me happy, mad, and frustrated. He would make me think twice about crying, even though I never let my tears fall down in front of him. But I figure if I did cry, he would have the upper hand. That’s why I kept on avoiding making it official, even though I wanted to. I just knew what he wanted and that he wasn’t serious about making a relationship with me.

He was the first guy to ever tell me no. Me. He didn’t want a relationship with me. I never had that experience of not being wanted so much. I mean I’m smart, cute, and funny—all that. I know I have issues, but who don’t. He was my little sweetie, but life goes on. My friend Elida she always say, “Next in line please.”

But what if everyone in the line were fraternal twins—just the same but look different, I got to thinking. “Was the problem me?” I mean it’s like a family trait or something. Five sistas and one mother—of course all of us seem to have the same problem: men. It even goes farther than my mother.

My grandmother had two husbands and three baby-daddies. Her problem definitely wasn’t getting one—it was keeping one. I knew someone had to put a man curse on us. Like put all the good men on the right side, and all the bad men on the other side.

Just like that my stupid-ass keep on going to the left, to the left.

I don’t want to carry the family curse: Being insecure of where my man is, having two different fathers for my sons, a baby’s father with a bus full of children for eight different women. I still get a kick out of my sista’s ex putting roses on her car at 4 o’ clock in the morning and
claiming he’ll kill himself if they break up. Last but not least I don’t need to be married for no 35 years wondering what if... Oh hell no, that’s way too long.

That’s only the women side of the family. I have five brothers and one father, thank god. Yup, all of them seem to be dogs. Maybe that’s just it. All guys seem to be dogs, at least most of them. But my brothers, the top pit bulls, all either got cut up, shot at, stalked, tires all slashed up, or got caught saying, “Baby I know you love me, but I cheated.” Maybe that runs in the family too, because I had sideline friends.

But that’s not the point. The point is whoever put a curse on my family, that’s ok. Just skip me in the process of it. And excuse me, if I seem selfish, but I’m in search of... well how could I know what I want when I never had it. I guess the family trait won’t end with me. It’s like a cycle, and the question I can’t seem to answer is, “How will I end what I keep on repeating?”
MEN IN MY FAMILY, MEN IN ME
Brittany Philson, Frederick Douglass High School

I don’t know why I’m confused about the men in my life. Maybe because they’re all a disappointment to the family. Then again I take that back, just a disgrace to me. From my father all the way down to my two brothers and also my oldest nephew, they’ve all done or are still doing something wrong to shame themselves in my book.

Like my father for example, I call him maybe once a month to let him know I’m doing alright. But you’d think after not seeing Michelle and me since Katrina he’d at least want to spend a day with his fun-loving girls. He doesn’t even know the most important things that are going on in our lives right now, like he’s going to be a grandfather soon when Michelle has her little girl, Taijah. And he doesn’t know that I’m going to the military to further my education and have a stable future ahead of me. But if I was to tell him, I don’t think he would even be excited. It may be because he’s so wrapped up with his new fling that he knows will change by next month. He’s just a low-life bastard who doesn’t care about the girls in his life. I hate the fact that I have the same “state of mind” that he has, but with men. Meaning I don’t like them to be in my company for a long period of time. I just hope he comes to realize that we’re his soldiers, and he can’t get rid of what he created no matter what disappearing act he tries to pull. Hopefully one of them will work soon, because he’s not that good at hide n seek. We could find his lazy ass even if we weren’t trying to.

Then there’s my youngest oldest brother Chris: Tall, slouchy, dreaded-up fool. He was smarter than anyone who dared to challenge him in book smarts. He would go as far as trying to challenge me when I was only in the ninth grade. He would try to make me solve a trigonometry problem only because he knew it first. But his stupidity got the best of him. He did something that would make his teenage years a living hell. It was the middle of his senior year at Booker T. Washington High School. He decided it was time for him to grow up and start making smart decisions that would get him some quick money. I guess I was one of the lucky ones to witness the outcome of his first big decision, when he and two of his buddies robbed Chicken in the Box on Martin
Luther King and S. Claiborne. I started to wonder if they planned that: His big debut in the Calliope Projects, hiding in someone’s house while sharpshooters and snipers wait for him to surrender. I didn’t know thinking smart like that would get you 12 years in prison with no parole. At least he got his 15 minutes of fame out of that ordeal. I also started to wonder why he did it that way. But then again they always called him crazy. I guess he wanted to live up to their expectations.

Now it’s my literally big, big brother’s turn. He kind of reminds me of that football player named Warren Sapp, just without the football edge. He was always a softy at heart, protecting his sisters, but always getting beat up by the boys. In a way, I should have been seen his life style coming: Popping and shaking with a house full of girls. Always wanting to do my hair. But he would do it in a playful way to where we wouldn’t think he was gay. But it all came out when one of my sisters had a heated argument with him, and he told us about his life style but just a little of what he was up to. I guess that girlfriend of his back in the G was the biggest front of them all. The real deal was those supposedly male work friends of his that you only saw once, and then that was it. But that was just the tip of the iceberg. Every time I would wonder why he would show up out of nowhere like he’s living large, dressing nice and smelling good, then suddenly disappear for 3 and 4 months at a time. Of course we all know about doing things for money, but sleeping with men for it shouldn’t have been his option. It wasn’t a big shock to me, because I’m very observant, and I knew something like that had to be going on.

But I can’t just say they’re completely messed up, because the boldest idiot Kevin, my nephew, made it on the list too. He’s smart when it comes to school, but when it comes down to using common sense, his IQ is 1. He’s more like the lighter version of my brother, from the way he walks, the things he says, and the way he acts, which is more like a jackass to me. The only reason I’m exposing his character is so that maybe he can look at what other people are seeing that he refuses to pay attention to, and to make him feel bad for the record. He’s a naïve 15-year-old who constantly disobeys his mother and other close relatives like me. But it’s like he says crazy things that he knows will get him fucked up, only because he knows better. Like for the get-together his mom threw for no apparent reason, he stood in front of a crowd of my friends and some distant family members and said, “So Brittany when are you going to the Marines to get your head blown off?” Now I’m not going to lie. It still hurts when I think about what his bitch ass told me.
But what his mama and I did to him later on that night always puts a smile on my face. It was like an exclusive scene of the WWF with weapons included. The way she was bashing him upside the head with an iron broomstick and punching him in the face with a fist full of rings. And me finishing where she left off by smashing his life with a hammer, meaning his PlayStation 2 and his $250 grill. I only did it because he again let his mouth overload his ass by stating that he didn’t care that she put him on punishment for the whole summer, cause he had his game to entertain him, so I had to make him suffer just one little bit more. Now he thinks I’m the meanest aunt that ever walked the face of this earth. He should have believed me when I told him I was really crazy. My other nephews should have warned him of that fact, and to think he would learn. He still slips up every now and then, and I’ll break something every now and then until he gets the picture.

Now since I’ve said all that, I can’t help but wonder why I feel this way about these men. It is because I’m scared of coming to the realization that I’m exactly like them, since I now find myself tempted to make bad choices for today and tomorrow. It’s more like I’m waiting for me to give up on life now that I know for a fact most people in my family are not good with making smart decisions.
WHO’S TO BLAME?

Vinnessia Shelbia, Frederick Douglass High School

Who is to blame? Why are there so many young black girls pregnant or having children and they don’t have a diploma. Why are there so many men young and old in prison? Why are there families without fathers? Why are drugs destroying our community? Why do we accept this?

We live with poverty like it’s not a problem. I think of all these things. They become overwhelming. I just want to cry, scream, and hurt something or somebody. But who or what’s to blame? A lot of the time I ask others and myself these questions. I ask my mother who was a teen mother herself. She says she believes it’s peer pressure and the lack of knowledge. She believes that parents should talk to their children. She says that most parents have to work and are tired and lack the time to talk to their children about sex.

My sister Angela is 22, and she doesn’t have any children. Angela says that parents should face the facts. Sex is a part of life. They shouldn’t be ashamed to talk about sex with their kids and get them control and protection.

Me being a young Black lady, I see things in a sort of different way. I don’t believe that most of the girls are purposely trying to get pregnant. I believe they are looking for love in all the wrong places.

“Boy friend”: who doesn’t have one? Well not many. These days it’s hard to find friendship in young men. It’s like they only want one thing. They lead you on and break your heart and turn you cold-hearted. I’m sweet-hearted, and I guess I’ll learn somewhere down the line. I like to see the good in people. I guess that’s why it’s easy for me to be lied to.

For all the teen mothers who really take care of their kids, I give them four thumbs up. I know it’s extremely hard. It takes lots of time and patience, that on some days they don’t have.

I know that males are seed givers and females are receivers. That’s probably one of the unthought-of reasons (besides many others) why they like to ‘get down’ so much. I seriously don’t know. What would possess males to treat, well I won’t say treat because nothing is sweet about that... Why would boys destroy girls the way they do? I
have brothers, and I have heard stories out of this world. All I can ask is “why?” They laugh and say “that’s all on her.” Love does hurt and is embarrassing when not returned. That’s all we are looking for is companionship. Behind that we’ll accept anything, almost anything. Like allowing unprotected sex, which leads to pregnancy. I don’t see that as a reason to drop out of school. Knowledge is powerful. Of course it’ll be hard. But who said it’ll be easy?

Parents should set standards for their children. Make them feel loved and make them feel that they are destined for greatness. When I was coming up my mother would say, “You ain’t gon be nothing, just like yo paw.” My father is a very loving person, but like most men he had no positive role model. He was in and out of jail with a nonchalant attitude. In the world I live in that’s the way people should be. They shouldn’t care about one another, especially men. They are supposed to be fearless and lack emotion. Men should be strong and loving at the same time. With being loving at the same time not looked at as soft, weak, or womanly.

So we get pregnant. 30% of us go ahead and further our education. The rest become welfare recipients or domestic workers. Barely making it. Living paycheck to paycheck. Sad to say, we accept it. We work for nothing, and that’s hard work to say after cashing that check you still can’t pay all of your bills. My mother is a housekeeper, so I am speaking from what I know not from what I heard. We get excited if a job is paying $7.00 or more. But how long can you work before you’re burned out? Over worked and under paid, it’s slavery in an advanced stage.

Who’s to blame? We accept it: we’re the blame.
A TIME WHEN SOMEONE LET ME DOWN...

Daja Brown, Frederick Douglass High School

It was February 20, 2007, Mardi Gras day. This is how it all started. It was a regular day, sunny and nice outside, and everyone was having fun. It was my family and I. We brought my little brother and cousin to see all of the floats. My friend Delwana called and asked where we were. I said on St. Charles, and we would be headed their way in a little while. So as the boring floats passed on St. Charles we decided to go under the bridge on Orleans and Claiborne. That’s where everybody has fun eating crawfish, crabs, just all types of seafood and Bar-b-Que.

So as I left away from my family to look for Delwana she was standing right in my face. I said “Girl I was just looking for you.” We stood on the sidewalk just observing everyone who was out there on Mardi Gras Day. We saw everybody that we wanted to see. We headed back to the stop where Delwana’s mother was. We wanted to get a hamburger, because we were hungry—well, I was hungry.

Everyone whom we knew was posted by a club named Escape, so we went over there to speak and just to hang out with everyone whom we hadn’t seen since Hurricane Katrina. Another friend of mine named Godeisha arrived. We started to take pictures with so many people, and we walked across the street from the club to go back by Delwana’s mom when we saw To-To, a very close friend, almost like a brother to us. He’s also my brother’s best friend. When I saw him, I gave him a huge hug, and we talked. I called my brother on the phone for him, and they were talking about how bad they wanted to see each other. They got off the phone with one another, and I asked To-To, “Where the baby at?” And he said, “She across the river. She’s not coming out here, but Markeisha is over there in the truck.” Markeisha is To-To’s Girlfriend and also the baby’s mother. I talked to her about 2 or 3 minutes and walked off to go get stamped at the club that we were planning to go to that night. As we finished getting stamped we went back under the bridge by the girls we know, and suddenly we heard two gunshots “POW! POW!”

We ran. One of the girls we went by went over there to see who it was who got shot. I was so scared my heart was pounding fast, and my
legs were shaking. So we finally went to go see who it was, and the only way that we knew who it was was by his wardrobe. Delwana said, “That’s To-To.” The first thing that came to my mind was my brothers, because they had a wonderful relationship like they were blood brothers.

I started to cry, thinking to myself, “Why? Why him?” We started calling the police, and I was talking to the operator, and I was so mad and confused I gave the phone to Delwana, and I started to pray saying “LORD, PLEASE DON’T LET HIM DIE. LORD PLEASE. HE’S A GOOD BOY, LORD. PLEASE SAVE HIM.”

After about three minutes or so the police and ambulance arrived to take him to the hospital. When they took him, we went into the club, and we were just in them days when you say just “FORGET EVERYTHING!!!!!!!”

About 2 or 3 hours later someone called my phone and said that To-To was just pronounced dead. All I could do was just say the person that I blame and who let me down was God. I hate to say it, but I do, because I prayed and asked him to let To-To live, but he died.

R.I.P. HARRISON MILLER aka TO-2
ODE TO CHARLIE

Julie Wedding, teacher and SAC staff member

First day of school
Your finger in my face
Six foot seeming eight
Red with rage and dreads
Your eyes meeting mine
You made a Promise.

You would make me cry.
I would cry because
You would make me.

I, still innocent
untaught teacher
stupid as a hamster
screwed in a plastic sphere,
took a bracing breath,
naively brave, committed,
completely missing
the warning,
the point of a promise made.

You kept your word.
I would cry because
You would make me.

Not when
class disruptions became your major
your masterpiece first quarter
Jokes, curses, gum, noise,
Threats.
Disruption. Destruction.
Mountains of hours of work
littering St Claude like confetti
parade debris honoring
the tenth grade hero of the third floor that day.
Teenage antics tempering
my last nerve, my eyes
wishing for windshield washers.
Charlie please sit down no Charlie sit down
Please Charlie sit down Charlie no
Please Charlie

You kept your word.

Not when
I understood
why you refused
to even honor a page with your name.
A young man bigger than most men,
yet who read worse than most boys.
Red with remorse, shame, sharing,

Our eyes meeting again,
a mended acquaintance
a truce of trust,
You moved to my side
Stayed safe trusted important at my desk,
mischievous smile satisfied
over a stolen pencil
marking a skipping student present

Charlie please sit down no Charlie sit down
Please Charlie sit down Charlie no
Please Charlie

You kept your word.

Not when
Violence filled the halls
taking over a school with a madness
contagious to both
child and adult
I felt safer with your arm holding shut the door
braced against the weight of chaos
wished for it
when their armed soldiers
replaced hysterical children
with real fear in our halls.
Their guns lowered your voice to a whisper
Asking if I was okay.
I took the gift of your concern
but could only give back a lie
Charlie please sit down no Charlie sit down
Please Charlie sit down Charlie no
Please Charlie

You kept your word.

Not when
A first paper was completed,
Last day of last quarter.
Your words strong, simple, true,
Finally captured,
Wrestled, forced into text.
I had no understanding,
though I had spent a year in the effort earnestly,
but you spelled it out for me.
student turned teacher.
teacher turned student.

You kept your word.
I would cry because
You would make me.

You kept your word
When
from school to streets
a mere two weeks
an administration over your antics
put your potential on paper
deemed it disposable
a child weathered by the storm
denied shelter in a school.
Fifteen bullets ended our lessons together
the corner of Florida and Congress
a lonely spot for a last breath.
Please Charlie no
Deny a child an education,
Deny a child a life
Your role as student ended,
your role as teacher remains.

You kept your word
and I,
I will keep the lesson.
BEFORE I WAS READY
Ariel Wells, McDonogh 35 High School

August 29, 2005. For residents of New Orleans and surrounding areas, this is a day that changed our lives forever. It was the day Hurricane Katrina ransacked our city and lives. Hurricane Katrina changed a lot in my life. Because of Hurricane Katrina, I lost a lot: my home, all my belongings, and my innocence.

The day after Labor Day, I began school at Lake Highlands Freshman Center. I was totally out of my element. The school had over 1,000 freshman. My school of seven days, Ben Franklin only had about 500 students in the entire school, so this was truly something new for me. My first few weeks of school were horrible. I missed my home, I missed my family, I missed my old school, I missed my old friends. I just missed my old life. I was ready to go home. The only thing that kept me there was basketball. I had joined the team on my first day at the school.

Besides the fact that I totally missed my New Orleans, I was being showered with attention, especially from the boys. I was something different from the girls they had been going to school with since elementary school, and I wasn’t too hard on the eyes either. Actually, I was far from being hard on the eyes. I can’t say that I didn’t like the attention. I was in a new city basically on my own. It didn’t hurt to have a few admirers of the male species.

There was one boy who tried harder than all the rest. He wrote me a letter every day telling me things about himself that he thought, for some strange reason, that I would care about. I liked the attention, but I had no intentions on giving any of these young men more than a few minutes of my time. But this boy, Cameron, just wouldn’t quit. He even tried that sympathy card, saying if I needed someone to talk to about being displaced, then he could be my shoulder to lean on. Ha. Because I was tired of him bothering me and thought it wouldn’t hurt to have someone to hang out with after school and to talk to at night, I finally gave in to his damn near begging.

Cameron was nice, for a little while. He just wasn’t enough to hold my attention. He was really attractive and really into me, but besides that, he had nothing to offer me. One day when I was going to the mailbox
for my aunt, this extremely hideous boy walked up to me. In this ridiculously country accent, he asked me what school I went to.

Disgusted, I responded, “Lake Highlands. Why you worried?”

He replied, “Alright lil bit. I’m jus askin. I thought I seen you around but I wasn’t sure. So you live here?”

This question was just too damn stupid for an answer, so I rolled my eyes and walked off. Why else would I be getting mail for the mailbox? As I walked up the stairs to my aunt’s apartment, I looked back at him standing there looking dumb. He was definitely not worth my time, especially after that ridiculous question.

Because he had approached me at the mailbox, I saw the ugly boy everywhere. I thought he was following me. Even when I was with Cameron, he showed up. Every day when I got home, he was outside. He spoke every day and never got more than a head nod in return from me. Oddly, I found myself thinking about him. He had lots of confidence, like he just knew he was going to get me. So the ugly boy ran through my mind constantly.

One day when I was at the mailbox again, he approached me… again.

“Yo, I’m Aaron,” he said with an air of arrogance.

“Ariel,” I said without looking at him.

I was still playing hard to get, even though I had been waiting on him to approach me again.

“Here’s my number,” he said as he took my phone and began putting his number in it.

“Who said I wanted yo number? Don’t think I’mma call,” I said.

“You will,” he said as he returned my phone to my pocket and walked off.

He was right. I was.

After my encounter with Aaron, Cameron was no longer interesting to me. All the cute things he often did for me were not cute any more, just really annoying. He was even looking less attractive. There was nothing attractive about Aaron but his confidence. When I talked to him, he always seemed so much older. He talked about things like he had actually experienced them, especially sex. In middle school, I always talked about it but never did it. I was terrified at the thought of it. Aaron talked like it was the best thing ever. I even played along
with him and went along with these conversations as if I, too, had experienced it.

One day, while my aunt was out, Aaron said he was coming over. What?! Why?! I thought to myself. I had snuck boys over before, but there was always at least one other person at home with me. I was nervous, but I told him it was cool. When he got there, he asked why my heart was pounding. I came up with some dumb ass excuse. Next, he led me to my room. My heart was pounding harder now. Louder. It was deafening me. I couldn’t hear Aaron when he told me to climb into the bed with him. I smiled and laid next to him. After just laying there for a little while, he pulled me on top of him. He started kissing me. I think he knew that I was nervous. He turned me on my back. As he hovered over me, he joked, saying, “You sure you’ve done this before?”

“Of course I have. Just come on nigga,” I told him.

All of a sudden, it happened. I couldn’t believe I was actually doing this. It was the worst. Why would someone want to put themselves through so much pain? I just closed my eyes and waited for it to be over.

I believe this was the day I lost my innocence. I always talked about sex, but I never had the nerves to do anything. Because I had lied about it, I put myself in a situation where I was experiencing something I wasn’t ready for. After that day, I continued to have sex, losing more and more of my innocence every time. I even went as far as having sex with a girl. I know it isn’t right to blame your own problems on someone or something else. I do think that it would have happened anyway. I just think that the emotional stress of Katrina left me in a position where I was looking for someone, anyone. Not that Katrina is the reason for my bad decisions. On top of that, I was trying to be older, more experienced, to impress this boy, so he wouldn’t think I was inexperienced and run to school and tell everyone at school. In the beginning, I pretended to be experienced when I was really innocent. Because I was pretending to be experienced, I lost my innocence before I was ready to.
ON KISSING FOR THE FIRST TIME
Christina Ruffins, McDonogh 35 High School

“I Could’ve Died”
With lips like water...
I could’ve died.
He gazed in my eyes, I could’ve cried.
When his touched mine,
What went through my mind?!
And my heart shined.
I could’ve died.

Remnants of him still in my skin.
Swallowed by the love within.
When we drew close, the world grew dim.
I was dazed by the likes of him.
I COULD’VE DIED!!! I could’ve died.

Hairs on end.
Stomachs turnin.
Knees got weak and we can’t speak.
Feels like I’m about to sin.
Yet and still, we begin...
To get so close that I can’t breathe.
Then open my eyes so I can see.
The passion of me feeling you.
So seductive and I fell for you.

I reminisce of his jovial smile,
Petal soft lips that drive me wild.
While all in all, not comprehending,
If this was real or am I pretending?
Then I realize to my surprise he’s by my side (I could’ve died). Those
dwonderful eyes shined back at mine. I could’ve DIED!!! I could’ve died.

Can I walk with you through your life?
Can I lay with you as your wife?
Can I be that friend till the end?
Can I have that mind, body and soul again?
I could’ve died realizing this:  
That he’s given me my first real kiss.  
And we’re so perfect when we’re together.  
Now that he’s here, life couldn’t be better.  
I could’ve died when his touched mine.  
I could’ve died! I could’ve died.

Dreaming of you with a face full of tears.  
I took a chance, domineering my fears.  
Spittin “G” so serene, was all I could hear.  
Your lyrical rhythm made my mind go clear.  
A. E. O. Y – I could’ve died!  
All Eyes On You in a serene milieu.

Contaminated, tainted, and blinded but was clearly—what I could see—between you and me—never thought this could be—I’m truly, genuinely, continually hoping that we will always be at least cronies... don’t be phony. ’Cause I’m fanatically addicted see? The way that he be lovin me... it’s like a drug or some bad habit, but since it’s mine I got to have it. I just gotta have it, ’cause I’m a fanatic. Not a bad habit, just gotta have it.

Going through things I never knew existed.  
But the thought of your touch, I just couldn’t resist it.  
Flesh so close, I feel you heartbeat.  
The pitter-patter, rhythmical matter—betrayed by the music in me.

You’ve got me speechless.  
You’ve got me breathless.  
You’ve got me trippin.  
You got me tremblin.

Baby I love being next to you.  
It’s like a high, I can’t come down from you.  
It’s hard to believe we have something to last.  
It’s hard to conceive you’re not in my past.  
Being with you is so relaxin.  
What kind of spells on me you be castin?
I could’ve died… listenin to your lyrics.
I could’ve died… every time I hear it.
I could’ve died… thinking of us.
I could’ve died… thinking love was a must.
I would’ve died… for a happy ending.
I should’ve died… ’cause I was pretending.
It ain’t no lie, I could’ve died. I might’ve cried or I could lie and I could try to deny, but why should I when I could’ve died.

C.Ruffins ‘04

_The space between the idea of something and its reality is always wide and deep and dark. The longer they are kept apart – idea of thing, reality of thing – the wider the width, the deeper the depth, the thicker and darker the darkness. This space starts out empty, there is nothing in it, but it rapidly becomes filled with obsession or desire or hatred or love – sometimes all of these things, sometimes some of these things, sometimes only one of these things._

— Jamaica Kincaid from “On Seeing England for the First Time”

The person whom I wrote this poem for, in my mind he was meant to be my boyfriend. It was the result of me receiving my first kiss. I was excited, and, therefore, illustrated those feelings through poetry. I was young and had begun to explore my sexuality. The stage of adolescence is one filled with fantasized ideas and misconstrued realities. Whether we grow and learn to differentiate the two is another situation. Still, the two remain and are in constant battle, and one eventually lives and its competitor dies. In this particular scenario, the idea (him and I were meant to be) is defeated by the reality (it was only a kiss). At that age, the idea of kissing was a major accomplishment. It was enveloped by excitement, peer pressure, and the young person’s notion of what was love. In reality, no youth could comprehend what came along with such territory. Yet, a kiss signified a sense of rebellion and growth.

Even into adulthood, we can sometimes misinterpret what is real and what is an idea. The focus is placed on either the reality or the idea, and it can become difficult to accept the differences between the two. Jamaica Kincaid’s essay, “On Seeing England for the First
Time,” explains a theory that there is always a void between the two. That void eventually begins to fill with obsession, desire, hatred, or love. I concur with this theory, because I can apply it to more than one instance in my life, as in the poem that opens this essay. The space between the reality and idea in this poem, I believe, is filled with obsession and desire. I was obsessed with the feeling that I experienced when we kissed, and such a new sensation led to a desire for more. After a while, the reality set in and destroyed the idea I had. That boy and I grew up and grew apart. Now, a kiss does not have the same significance. It is not the greatest accomplishment, rather a factor that might lead to something more: more in hope for bonds to be formed, friendships to mature, and relationships to become official. At that time, the reality of just a kiss had slaughtered my idea of a life-long love.
I still remember my first kiss. It was everything I thought it would be. Me and my favorite cousin were outside talking. Then my best friend Renard came outside. We all were just talking and cooling. Then I decided to call my other friend Lisa, who was real cool with my first kisser. I think it was about 7:40 going on 8:00 at night. At the time, I was 13 years old, and he was 14. So anyways, Lisa called him outside. Everybody was still cooling, talking—ya know, just chillin. So Lisa, my favorite cousin Brittany, and Renard left and went to the corner store, Q and B. They asked me and him if we were going to come. We said no. Brittany already knew what was up.

So we didn’t just start kissing right then and there. We made a short five-minute convo first. Then it happened. We made eye contact. I was ready to kiss. He was a gentleman and asked if he could kiss me. Now you know I didn’t say no. So there we were hugging and lips touching. It was like on cartoons when they kiss. Fire works come out. It was like when you find money. Anybody else could have found it, but you did. That’s what made my first kiss special.
I don’t remember my first kiss. I remember who it came from, but that moment when our lips first touched doesn’t play in my mind. I do remember my very special kiss. It was the beginning of our relationship, when there’s no fighting and that person is always on your mind.

We hadn’t talked the whole morning, I guess because I was having a busy day at school. Usually I would find time to call and sneak in a “what you doing?” or “how your day goin?” But this day I couldn’t find the time.

Not talking to him had me very anxious. 3:00 that evening came, and school was over. I went on with my daily routine, walking and thinking about past conversations that we shared. I got home, put my bags down, and next I picked up the phone. Before it could get to the second ring my momma gave me the news that he had passed around the house looking for me.

When he answered the phone, my first question was “where you at?” “On my way around there by you.”

I said “okay see you later.” I wanted to hurry off the phone, so I could take off my school uniform and put on some regular clothes. Before I knew it the phone was ringing. I knew it was him, so I didn’t answer because I wasn’t ready. After I spruced myself up, out the door I went.

We stopped at the Chinese place and got something to eat. After we ate we drove to the lake. We stood close to the water, and I felt cold. My eyes rolled up from the water, and the moon looked close enough for me to hold it. For the first time in my life, I saw the moon float on water. It was so beautiful.

I thought about how my world had changed. Down came the tears of joy. He looked in my face and asked why I was crying. I told him I was happy. He kissed me, and I took the place of the moon. I was the one, now floating.
GRANDDAD:
A Man I Love and Hate
Brandon Caldwell, McDonogh 35 High School

I’ve been lucky to grow up in a family where everyone’s close. I even consider my cousins to be my brothers and sisters. But on one level, we’ve been unequal. Out of all my siblings and cousins, I am the only one who catches hell from all of the adults. Don’t get me wrong. They all caught hell from someone. Ashley (my sister) had my mother; Bryan (cousin) had my grandmother; Craig (cousin) had my aunt; Lloyd and Lamar (cousins) had my uncle; Kristen (cousin) had my grandmother. I on the other hand caught hell from all of the family I just mentioned and more. But most of all I caught hell from my grandfather. He favored my sister, always has. We would spend the night over there, and when breakfast came, he’d wake Ashley up to feed her but refused to cook for me. And when I would get breakfast, I’d get two-week-old leftovers, while Ashley would laugh at me with her doughnuts.

Ashley went everywhere, while I had to stay inside. When we would ask to ride our bikes, he never let me go. Ashley would be able to, but not me. I couldn’t even ride in a circle in front the house. I couldn’t get help from my grandmother (who tried to favor me), because his word was final. And this lasted for many years and got worse. He even made me eat food out the trash once. This continued until he got sick and died, and although he treated me like that, I couldn’t hate him. I still miss him. And I really don’t know why.
My maternal grandparents both were born and raised in a small town by the name of Jennings, Louisiana. Both were the only ones to graduate from high school in their families. My grandmother is the third oldest out of eleven children, and my grandfather is the fifth oldest out of nine children. After they graduated from high school and married, they decided to move to a bigger city: New Orleans. They said they couldn’t stay in the small town any more. They wanted to start their own family somewhere bigger and new. My grandparents planned on having five children, but my grandmother had three miscarriages. So, now, all they have are two girls: my mom and my aunt who are ten years apart, my mom being the oldest. My family is very small, but we stick together through all our hardships.

Every time we get a chance, we take a short trip to visit our family members in Jennings. My grandfather always takes me around his old neighborhood. He tells me how things were bad for him, because people would tease him because he was the only one to attend school and actually graduate. He showed me the old shack house that his father built that is still standing to this day. When my grandfather showed me these things, I said that I was very thankful because I live in a very clean neighborhood and house. He told me that he even had to fix the house multiple times when it needed repairs. My grandfather said he tried to set an example for the people in his neighborhood, because he thought it would make them feel stupid, because he was the only one to finish school. He thought that if he was the only one to attend school, it would make the other people feel stupid and that would make them want to go to school also, but it didn’t turn out that way. There were people who dropped out of school when they were only in eighth grade. My grandfather said he practically raised himself and his family before and after his parents died. He didn’t have to raise them, because his father or mother walked out on them, but he had to raise them because his family was poor and his dad was always working twenty-hour shifts. While still in school, my grandfather also had to work to raise money to support his family.

Once he moved to New Orleans he continued his hardworking ways. To this day, he never regrets leaving his home town. He gives his family
everything it needs, including money when they don’t even want it. I never want to take money from my grandfather when he gives it to me, because I know he didn’t have anything when he was younger. He would always tell me to look at it as a reward. He also told me if anyone gives me money without any reason, just take it because that person probably never had anything when they were younger and is just being generous to other people.

I always wondered why my grandfather gave his brother (who is an alcoholic) money every time he asked for it. Then one day it hit me. I remember what my grandfather told me when he gave me money. Just recently, my uncle, who is my grandfather’s brother, asked him for five dollars, and I was right there listening to him, and I said to myself that he was the same person to tell my grandfather that he was dumb for going to high school. I stepped in the conversation and asked my uncle if he really wanted five dollars, and he said “yeah.” So I raised my hand and balled my fist and yelled, “Here you go. Where do you want it?” And he told me that he remembered when I was a little kid that I used to be scared of him. I told him that I wasn’t scared any more, and he started laughing. He was drunk, so he thought I was playing, but I really wasn’t. My grandfather looked at me and told me that he would handle it. I was so mad, because I thought my uncle didn’t deserve the money, even though he is my grandfather’s brother. In my grandfather’s eyes, he felt the need to give his brother the money, even though he didn’t deserve it. My grandfather is the kind of person who won’t say no to any family member, even if they have done wrong. I personally thought my uncle didn’t deserve it, because he treated my grandfather bad when they were younger. I felt that it was his choice not to attend school and succeed, so why should my grandfather have to give him money every time he asks for it? Well, the answer is very simple. It’s because my grandfather knows his brother did wrong, and he chooses to give him money, because he feels bad for him.

Every time my grandfather tells me this story and shows me around his neighborhood, I cry, because I can’t believe he actually had to grow up in that condition. Every time he finishes the story he always tells me: “Iesha, if someone ever tells you that you ain’t worth nothing, just look at them and say thank you because that person is just saying that they want to be like you, but they are scared because they are afraid of what the other people will say about them.”

I never knew what my grandfather was saying, but when I got older I realized that my grandfather was right. This story is a memory of
my grandfather’s life that always reminds me about the hard times my grandfather had. I’m glad my grandfather told me about his life, because it helps me to continue my journey to succeed. If it wasn’t for him, I don’t know where I would be. He told me that I should never let anyone judge me just because of where my family came from. My grandfather is my hero because he motivates me to continue my education and move further in life.
My grandfather and I were inseparable, when I was young. He’d take me into the garden and teach me all the basics of planting seeds and maintaining the garden. Sometimes he’d take me to get a hair cut in this old hardwood floor shop and just sit and wait for me with a smile. He would drive me into the country and show me where he used to live. I have the best grandfather in the world I used to think and still do.

It wasn’t until I was twelve that I found out my dad was kicked out of his house at fifteen for grabbing my grandpa to prevent him from hitting my grandma. I also learned that my grandpa used to whip my grandma and my dad too.

I was in disbelief when I heard this. My grandma confirmed it in a way that made me feel better. She said I had asked her about my mom and she left (claiming my dad had grabbed her). Grandma said grandpa hit her, but she didn’t leave because she knew he loved her and their children. She said he had a real soft heart wrapped in sandpaper and gradually wearing down. I guess my grandfather and I are so close because I came when his roughness had worn off.
My grandfather sat in the large chair in his living room. His grandchildren, including me, sat around him in amazement, eager to listen to everything he said as if never told before. Every time he would tell his stories about World War II, he would start off slow as if he was hesitant to start. He would look off day dreaming. It seemed to me like the events he was telling were happening all over again. He would even start talking like Johnny, all frustrated and upset, saying:

“Karl, it’s just not fair!”

“Yeah, I know Johnny. But you have to give a little in order to get,” my grandfather replied.

These two World War II soldiers were friends. Training and fighting together had helped them learn how to talk to each other, to understand each other’s moods. Soldier Johnathan Boure’, or Johnny as he was often called, was upset because once again white soldiers would not allow black soldiers to eat with them. Lots of times they could not eat at all.

“It’s just not fair. They think they’re better than the rest of us. I’m fighting this war just like them,” said a frustrated Johnny.

“Well you know how things work ‘round here. It’s nothin’ new,” Karl tried to explain to his upset friend.

But there was no use. Johnny already knew that what they were doing was wrong. Even though Johnny was a mulatto, who could have passed for white, he was always proud to state that he was black and did not care who knew. He was much lighter than all the other black soldiers, but he still did not want the white soldiers to treat him differently from the other black soldiers. He did not want to be treated much differently from the white soldiers, for that matter. He wanted to be treated as an equal to everyone else.

“Come on Karl, let’s go,” said Johnny.

“John, where are we gonna go?”

“I don’t know. Let’s go for a walk. Anywhere but here.”
So the two soldiers began to walk. They had been walking for at least ten minutes when Johnny spotted a little girl. She was lying face down in the dirt. Johnny ran over to see if the girl was alive or not.

“Johnny, what are you doing? You could get us killed. I told you we shouldn’t wander off like this.”

“Karl, she’s just a little girl for God’s sake. She could be in trouble.” Johnny yelled.

“Yeah, but she’s the enemy’s little girl,” replied Karl.

Johnny checked for a pulse. The little girl was still living. As he lifted her head out of the dirt, he could hear her begin to cough.

“Good, that means she’s still breathing. Give me your canteen,” Johnny said to Karl as he reached in his pocket for his handkerchief.

Johnny wet the handkerchief with the water that was in the canteen. After he wet it, he began to wipe off the little girl’s face, hands, and legs. He then gave the little girl the canteen to drink from. As the little girl got up, as if to speak, she turned around and began to run.

“Where’d she go?” asked Karl.

“I don’t know,” Johnny said, wondering also. Just then as the two men looked up, they saw the little girl. On the side of her, as if she were pulling him along, was a man with similar looks to hers holding Karl’s canteen. As the man came to Karl and Johnny, the little girl stopped him. He began to speak, but he started off very slowly.

“Are you the men who helped my daughter?” the man questioned in his heavy accent.

“Uh, Uh, Yeah that was us,” Johnny said in amazement.

“Thank you ever so much. How can I repay you?” the man asked.

“Uh, no problem at all,” Karl said suspiciously.

“Are you hungry or thirsty?” the man persisted.

“Well, as a matter of fact we are, sir,” Johnny said proudly.

“Follow me,” the man said.

Karl and Johnny followed the man into what seemed to be a hut. There, they ate and drank as much as they could.
“Well sir, I’m sorry but we have to be going,” Karl said.

As Johnny got up, he walked over to the man, shook his hand and said: “Thank you for proving we’re equal.”

As the two soldiers walked out the modest home, the father just smiled.

My grandfather leaned back in his big chair, looking at each of his grandchildren. He smiled, reminding me of the father in the story. We all climbed up and hugged him. He reached down to pick me up, and I kissed him on his pale skin.
THE HOUSE ON NORTH DORGENOIS STREET

Moriah Tyran, McMain Secondary School

My grandfather leans on the old white fence
As we pull up into the narrow driveway,
His dogs behind him barking and jumping up and down
Because of our familiar scents.
Smelling the different greens and vegetables
In the garden as I walk past,
I feel home at last.
“Niggers. Go Home,” drowned out the sound coming from the radio in my grandfather’s car. As he drove his family to its new home on Werner Drive in New Orleans East, white arms holding brown baseball bats and swinging cold, hard black guns in the air was an image my mother had never seen. My grandpa reaching under the seat to show his new neighbors that he had pretty metal too will always be remembered on November 4, 1971, my mother’s birthday.

William Butler Yeats, in his poem “The Second Coming,” asks: “Have we, like the falconer, lost control of the means to halt our descent into chaos?” Parents are failing in providing my generation the history of our families. Black men are filling the prison system. If they knew what people did back then to ensure freedom and justice for us now, maybe they’d try and take advantage of every opportunity that’s been earned for them by men like my grandfather. Maybe they’d vote and get an education.

Knowing that my mom had to go through terrorizing threats by “average” white residents of New Orleans just to have a bigger house in a newer neighborhood is amazing to me. I take pride in the fact that I live in New Orleans East, because it was a place where just one generation ago blacks were not wanted. Now it’s predominantly black and is filled with hard-working people just trying to provide a better life for themselves and their families.
When my dad told me my granddad couldn’t read or write, I was shocked.

My granddad, Lloyd Turner, was born and raised in Natchez, Mississippi, where he still lives. He is the only person I know without an elementary or high school education to become a carpenter, raise nine children, and build over seventy houses including his own.

I didn’t find this out until one weekend my dad and I went to visit him. We went to church with him on Sunday. The church was really small and surrounded by a lot of trees. There were about 15 people there, including my dad and I. My granddad was sitting in the pulpit, because he’s a deacon. When it was time for my granddad to do scripture reading, a lady stood on side of him and read the scripture and he repeated. I asked my dad, “why is he repeating after her?” He told me to be quiet and he would tell me after the service. Because I was so anxious to find out, the service seemed to be taking forever. Finally, church ended. I hopped in my dad’s big white truck. Before he could get in the seat good, I asked, “now can you tell me why he was repeating after that lady?” He told me that my grandfather couldn’t read. I couldn’t believe it. There was silence for the rest of the ride. I was in deep thought. Many questions were going through my mind. Who did his children go to when they needed help with their schoolwork? How can he be a carpenter, if he can’t read or write?

I later found out that my granddad understands architect blueprints and can read numbers and to my surprise helped my dad with his schoolwork.

My dad told me he remembers having problems in math.

“I was in about the 3rd grade. I asked my dad what was the difference between inches and feet? He pulled out his ruler that he kept in his pocket. We got on the kitchen floor, and he laid out the ruler and explained it to me.”

I know my granddad isn’t proud that he can’t read or write. I’m not either, but I am proud that he didn’t give up. I know along the way there were obstacles in his way, but he got past them. I always
thought people who couldn’t read or write would have it extra hard trying to make it in the world. I know now that it might be challenging but not impossible.
Brown tobacco juice stains the corner of his mouth,
his voice so old and full that it’s both high and deep at once.
The years of work and play stoop his thick shoulders forward.
Thick calloused hands, stubby fingers, tough yellowing nails:
Picking vegetables he cannot see, directed by his stroke-palsied wife who can see but not bend, grasp.
He laughs, “It takes two of us to make a whole person.”
Missing and being inspired by his optimism in the toughest time,
His wisdom deep as the bones beneath those hands, the seeds in that earth.
I followed my aunt towards the motorcycle that was parked in the front yard of my grandparents’ house. I got on the back of the motorcycle and tightly held onto her waist. She kicked the pedal to start the engine, and we were on our way. Driving through the neighborhood, it was hard for me to see and breathe because of the dirt roads making dust fly into the air. Finally, we arrived. Trying to find a parking spot, we managed to squeeze the motorcycle between two other motorcycles which were like two feet apart. My aunt took my hand and walked me through a hallway. Crowdedness couldn’t possibly explain the amount of people who were there. Sliding and dodging through that maze of people, my aunt entered a room. My parents and relatives were all in there surrounding something. I joined the circle, and I saw an old man lying on a bed. He had an anxious look on his face as if he was waiting for something or someone. I was looking at my grandpa, and that was the last time I saw him.

It was summer of 2005, when I took a trip to Vietnam. My dad, sister and brother had booked an earlier flight to Vietnam, and I stayed back to go with my mom on a flight that was one week after their flight. I wasn’t very open-minded about this whole trip, but I wanted to see my grandpa. My sister emailed me when she was there and told me it was very fun. So, I was curious to see how this trip would be. To my surprise, Vietnam was a remarkably fun place. There were so many foods to try and different things to do.

The moment I arrived in Vietnam, my relatives’ enthusiasm made me think everything was great and dandy. No one told me that my grandpa was severely sick. He had been in the hospital for about a week already—a little bit before my dad, sister and brother arrived. They were able to spend some time with him when he was well, and I couldn’t. My grandpa was able to go pick them up from the airport along with the rest of my relatives. My dad was especially happy, because he saw his dad again. Then they all went to my grandparents’ house to celebrate my dad, sister, and brother’s arrival. My sister’s
memory of my grandpa when he was still well was when he drove her to a Vietnamese noodle—Pho—stall at 6 in the morning to eat breakfast. She was fascinated that he could still drive a motorcycle. “It was great to enjoy a nice, warm bowl of Pho with grandpa,” she told me. I imagined getting to spend time with him—something that simple—but I came too late.

My grandpa was a short old man with white hair—one that you would think is grumpy and all. However, once you talk to him, you’ll see that he’s a child stuck in an old man’s body. I was his favorite granddaughter, because I never made him angry. He was my favorite grandpa, because he had a heart of a child—one that’s always curious and looking for something fun to do. Despite his young heart, his lungs were very old and weak. He suffered from lung cancer, and that’s why he was put in the hospital.

It was my second day—June 24, 2005—in Vietnam. It was just like the other day: hot and quiet. Only my sister, a few cousins, and I were at home playing cards at my grandparents’ house. Suddenly, my aunt came and hastily took us to the hospital to see my grandpa. I was happy because I would finally get to visit my grandpa, but I didn’t expect it to be my last visit.

He lay there breathing so hard like he had just run a marathon—still trying to hold on to his life. I saw his eyes slowly wandering around the room, and then his eyes caught mine. I knew by the look in his eyes, he wanted to talk to me. I stepped up next to his bed—trying to hold my tears in. He asked, “Is that you Ngan?” I sucked in a big gulp of air and replied, “Yes grandpa. It’s me.”

“You’re so grown now. I remember when you were in 3rd grade, and you had that big roller back pack.”

“Remember when you used to roll it for me when you walked me home from school grandpa?”

He joked, “Yea, you were so tiny that the backpack was bigger than you.”

I laughed, but my laugh caused me to cry. Underneath my sadness there was joy, because my grandpa waited for me. He waited to see me so he could tease me. That’s when I realized he was happy. Although he knew he was dying, he held on to his life for one thing. The last chance to see the ones he loved, to show them that he was happy letting go, and to make sure they wouldn’t be sad seeing him go on.
I couldn’t bear to see him suffer. He was like a fish without water. After he spoke with me, he spoke with my sister. When he was done, he looked around the room at his family. He took one last hard breath and then closed his eyes peacefully. He had fought for so long already. He finally fulfilled his wishes, so now he could stop fighting and leave in peace.

I was relieved to see him for the last time and seeing him with his young heart—so happy. I was also glad that I helped him fulfill part of his wish and one of the reasons for him to keep fighting for his life.
QUESTIONS FOR MY GRANDFATHER
Kanisha Daniels, Frederick Douglass High School

The snow on the old pine tree, like an x-ray searching out some kind of cancer.
And the best I can do is wonder just exactly what you'd say about it.
I was seven, almost eight, bouncing on a knee.
And if I'd known anything about war not played with flimsy, dull-edged cards around an old, extended kitchen table every Sunday or two, I might have asked.
I bet it changed people, war, I mean.
Killing all those mother's sons.
Shooting sounds like a small town's fireworks.
And everything I've read about.
It's cold here, and my footprints explode into this inch or two of snow and then disappear, lost with each gust of wind.
And if I could, I'd ask him how a kid no older than me can get sent to hell and live to talk about it.
EVERLASTING CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE

Oel Scott, McDonogh 35 High School

The one experience that I think will always stick with me is my summer vacation to Los Angeles. I was blessed to have my grandfather take me on this vacation in the summer of 2002.

It was a year after 9/11, and we were too cautious to fly, so we took a train for safety. The two-and-a-half-day ride was an adventurous trek across, for the most part, the nothingness of Texas. The outward sight was monotonous, but the inside of the train was very exciting. There were people I met from all over the world, and the food was great. One thing I enjoyed most was sneaking up into first class and watching the movies.

Los Angeles was my first glimpse of what paradise looked liked. The long, broad, palm tree-lined streets appeared to continue into the horizon. The weather was always “just right,” a phrase that meteorologists used so very often. It was always “just right” to do anything, so I, being very adventurous, did everything. From the elaborate museums to the crowded Santa Monica Pier, I was seriously everywhere. Best of all the Los Angeles Lakers were in the championship matches against the Philadelphia 76ers. So during game time the whole city was attentive. It was also not uncommon to hear a few gun shots exploding in to the air while Iverson smashed the Lakers’ defense. Though it would take more than a couple shots to bring me down from the cloud I created out of this paradise.

This trip was something I will always remember. Though my time in L.A. was a remarkable new experience, it was not the main reason I remember it. It is mostly because of my grandfather who took me out there that I remember. He always wanted to do activities of this nature, so that I could become a well-cultured man. Every summer for doing well in school he brought my younger brother and me on a special vacation. Since he did not work, I assumed he saved up every year so that we could go and travel. His teachings have helped me out exceedingly as I go on through life. One thing that I have learned which continues to stick with me today is that no matter how expensive a trip may be the things I learn and experiences I have will remain priceless.
I was born and grew up in Vietnam, so I was very familiar with the cultures, traditions, language, society, people, and lifestyle there. My life was very comfortable and joyful. I always received everything I wanted. I thought I was a princess, not just a girl. But I recognized that I wasn’t a princess or even a human any more after I immigrated to America.

To adapt someone’s habit to a different and strange custom is very hard. I am a good example in that circumstance. My life was unlike as previous. I didn’t have my own house. I couldn’t go anywhere freely. I couldn’t make many friends. All was just because I couldn’t speak English well. I was very afraid of jeers and derision of everybody around me. I usually tried to elude and ignore anyone who approached me. There were only three places I felt comfortable: my house, school, and church. Every time I saw children who were my age who were happy and cheerful, I felt very jealous and sad. I occasionally cried and thought that I wasn’t a human. Maybe I would continue living in dread, I worried.

But no, my life was refreshed when I met a classmate named Tu. He is a Vietnamese. He is very strong, brave, diligent, and smart, although he doesn’t look so handsome. In class, he was always the person who first tried to help and explain difficult things for me. He wasn’t like other friends I know. Instead of speaking English to prove he speaks English well, he spoke Vietnamese so I could understand and get easily in conversation. I quickly felt friendly and familiar. My fear and shyness went away. We became best friends quickly. Since then, I became more self-confident and courageous to hang out with other friends to exchange their language. Also, I became acquainted with the circumstance and style of life in America. I felt my life was becoming interesting and cheerful, much better than the first time when I just immigrated to America.

During three years living in America, Tu helped me to find a lot of interesting things such as how friendly people treat each other.
Friends and classmates aren’t bad, selfish, and haughty as I thought. They are very nice and generous. They treat me with compassion and sympathy. They help me become a part of American life. I feel no more fear when I contact my friends any more, but oppositely, I am comfortable with everything new around me. Now, I can find back a house of my own. I can make many new friends. I can get anything I want like in the past. Now, I feel very happy like a princess who is enjoying her wealth and favors.

Tu is the best friend I’ve ever met. We have many common characteristics, future plans, and dreams. It’s very difficult to find a friend having many of the same features like that. Because of that, he became my boyfriend. I have many beautiful and joyful times with him. He usually gives me surprise presents that someone else can not do. I think he may be the only one person in the world who can make me smile the entire time. I feel very happy and pleasant when I know I’m not alone. I know there’s Tu always close to me, ready to talk with and protect me. Especially, I appreciate and love him because he helped me to become a human again.
In my younger days I was accustomed of always being there for my mother. As far as I remember, it all started when my dad left my mom for whatever unknown reason. My mom was a single parent raising two children: my brother and me. My mom worked two jobs and did house-sitting most of the time, so I didn’t get to see her as much as I wanted to. She would come in late to the house all exhausted and lazy, so that left me with most of the chores. I started sweeping, mopping and cooking for the first time, when I was about four years old. My oldest brother, whom you would expect to take on the responsibilities of cleaning and cooking, was nowhere to be found when it was chore time. Besides he didn’t get along with my mom at all. He used to get beat daily because of the fact that he chose to live his life as a homosexual. She wasn’t too fond of him being that way. After all, what mother would be?

Growing up in all this confusion made my brother bail out on us to go live his life where he thought he could not be judged. The separation of my brother and mom was nerve wracking. With him not around I couldn’t lie and say it was Myron who did this or it was Myron who did that. But there were some good things out of this separation. I started receiving more attention, more toys, and my mom even dropped one of her jobs to stay at home more. She didn’t seem as stressful as she used to. There were no signs of laziness or exhaustion any more.

Life was going well for about six years, until my mom met this man named Dechaun Lavigne. I hated his guts. He would come over and steal all of my mom’s attention. She used to buy him really nice things like hats, watches and clothes. This was all cutting out of my toy money, so you know I wasn’t too big on that. When he came around, she was a whole new person, I mean totally different. You know like how parents try to act all “holy” in church, but when you get home they cutting up? That’s her. He would make her laugh, smile and be very happy. This bothered me, because I wasn’t used to another man making her happy. It was always me. I was the momma’s boy, and for him to come and take my title was something unthought-of. They soon went on to get married and what a hell day of a wedding that was. I
remember the Reverend saying the traditional lines “any one who feels that these two people should not get married speak now or forever hold your peace.” I stepped out of the line of groomsmen and said, “I don’t want them to get married.” Everyone laughed like I just told one of the famous Richard Pryor jokes or something. They didn’t take me seriously and continued on with the wedding.

Once they got married my mom relocated us to Kenner where we were in this nice two-bedroom townhouse. It wasn’t anything cheap, so she decided to work another job again. My step dad wasn’t much of a real man at all. He was an unemployed couch potato. A real man would not have made his wife go out and work two jobs and house sit while he’s eating popcorn and watching ESPN. The long nights of work started coming again, so that meant more chores. My step-dad and I got into it every day. When my mom would leave, he would try and mess over me by making me do stuff he was supposed to do. Like when one day he told me to “clean the front room and make sure all the clothes in the washing machine is put in the dryer.” I specifically heard my mom tell him to do that right before she left. He would also tell me things regarding my daddy like “he doesn’t love you” and all kind of things. I would tell my mother, but you know how it is: the parents always believe the adults, let alone her husband. The fact that my mother didn’t believe me made me mad. I then started doing things to sabotage their relationship. I regret that now. I used to fake like he hit me and run and tell for any little thing he would do. I was addicted to messing over his life. But what I failed to realize is that while I was hurting him, I was also hurting her and that was the last thing that I wanted to do. So I stopped terrorizing their life.

As time went on I grew older and started realizing that I never examined the positive things my step-dad did. He was a self employed man who did business by sitting down, as awkward as it sounds. He really loved my mom and would do anything for her. Like when she told this fool to back flip off the couch, knowing he can’t flip, but he did it anyway. Our relationship grew stronger when I realized that we both would do anything to see my mom happy, and I had to accept that there is someone else capable of walking away with her heart besides me. I remember actually giving him a dap on our first Christmas together. We had both put our money together to get my mom a gift. That Christmas wasn’t about receiving presents. It was about me actually becoming human with my step-dad by accepting him into the family.
Jeremy and I have been friends for almost seven years. We are almost the same. The only difference is I am a girl, and he is a boy. Besides that, we are very close and can talk about anything. Jeremy and I always hung out together, not just at school but on the weekends also.

Just as girls have girl friends, boys have boy friends. Jeremy and I just happen to have each other along with other friends. We relate to one another by talking to each other about any and everything that is on our mind. We do many of the same things, such as play video games, play sports, fix computers, and admire cars. I guess you can say he brings out the boy side in me. I do the same for him by bringing out the girl side. I do that by talking about different fashion statements and teaching him the different types of brands and styles of clothing and shoes. When we go to the mall, he helps me shop by telling me a boy’s opinion on my clothing, and I help him do the same. Then at times when we play video games and sports, he teaches me the new moves he has learned.

We sometimes do not agree on the same thing, but we discuss the problems until we agree on a common ground. When I need a boy’s advice about something, I go straight to him, and he does the same thing when in need of a girl’s opinion or advice. There was a time when I liked this boy, but I did not know if he liked me, so I asked Jeremy what I should do. He told me that I should just be myself and talk to the boy. Jeremy also said I should just tell the boy that I like him because boys are not really into the “hint hint clue clue” game. He then told me it was either a good thing or a bad thing. The good part is he might like me back. The bad part would be the boy not liking me, and I would have just wasted all that time trying to get a boy who didn’t even like me.

Another reason I think we are so closely related is that his parents and my parents raised us in the same manner. Therefore, we went through many of the same things. We learned to respect one another and treat other people the way we want to be treated. We also do not judge people based on their sex. Just because someone does not have the same private area as we do, does not mean they cannot hold an
interesting conversation. He treats me like I am one of the boys, and I treat him as if he is one of the girls.

Males and females need one another to live our normal daily life. No matter if we share features with the opposite sex or not, we still need each other.
It wasn’t easy growing up for me, because my mom died when I was three and left me, my little brother, my older sister, and my oldest brother. My younger brother and I were young when she died, so her death didn’t really affect us, but it did affect my other two siblings because they were older and really were attached to her. I didn’t even know I had a father until my fifth birthday. He came and gave me a card with two dollars and a little black doll. Then he brought my little brother and me to see our other brothers and sisters. I was so scared, because I didn’t know anyone. That night my father told my brother and me that he would always be in our lives. I was so happy, but it was the last time I ever saw him. Later I found out he was in jail for robbery. I was a little upset about him being in prison. He is my father after all. But at the same time I didn’t care, because he had never been in my life before that fifth birthday.

My mom had left me, my little brother, my oldest brother and my oldest sister behind. My oldest brother was 19 at the time and promised us when he got everything together, he’d come and get us to live with him. Meanwhile we’d be staying with one family. But every year it would be another family. Sometimes it was people I didn’t even know. But I was glad, cause I knew I’d be safer than in a foster home. I really didn’t like living with other people, cause it wasn’t my house and I kind of felt uncomfortable. I had to deal with it though.

Since we moved around so much, we never had friends and went to different schools every year. I remember when I was in the 2nd grade my aunt told me to go get some money from underneath her mattress, and I saw a paper. So I read it, and it said that I would have to repeat the second grade. I was so sad if I would have been kept back. People would talk about me more than usual. My brother and I were always talked about, because we didn’t have the best clothes. It made me feel bad, but it didn’t bother me as much as when people talked about my mother. I knew it wasn’t true, but it still hurt. Sometimes I’d go in the bathroom and cry. That’s why I had a lot of fights. It never was for me; it was always for my brother. One time this boy Christian was trying to fight my brother, who wasn’t really a
fighter, so he always told me. But that day after school I saw Christian walking, and I punched him and busted his nose. I got in so much trouble for that my aunt whom we lived with called my older brother and told him I was smelling my drawers.

In the middle of my 2nd grade year my oldest brother took me, my younger brother and my sister out of the schools we were in and brought us to his apartment. I was so happy to be living with my brother. I could start all over, meet new friends, have new clothes, and no one would talk about me or my brother. It was the summer of my 3rd grade year. My brother took us outside and told us he had some financial problems. (I didn’t know what that was. I thought he was talking about a fiancée.) So he told us we’d move with my Auntie Denise. I wasn’t too excited, because she lived near Magazine. It was a shotgun house. I hated it. But when we moved to the house, it wasn’t on Magazine. My auntie’s family had just moved to a big, orange brick, two-story house on France and N. Roman. When I saw that house, I was so happy, because it wasn’t a dump like the other one.

What I didn’t know but found out later is that my oldest brother had asked all my family to take us in, and they all said, “no.” But when he asked my Auntie Denise, she was the only one to say yes.

We lived in my Auntie Denise’s house from when I was a little girl in 4th grade until I grew into a well-respected young lady and Hurricane Katrina came at the start of my 10th grade year. I will repay Auntie Denise by graduating from high school and college. I will make her proud.
DREAMS ARE REALLY REAL
Kalamu ya Salaam, SAC teacher and staff

Dreams are not just what we imagine at night, nor simply mental movies we passively watch in our sleep. Dreams are really pieces of everything we’ve ever felt, every reaction to every idea that’s ever crossed our mind, not just our sacred ideals but also all the unmentionables our tongues never say, the secrets repeated over and over to no one but ourselves and as such, dreams can be disconcerting.

At night we are a bright forest of feelings clawing at whatever containers cage our desires, hacking away at the behavioral tethers that hold us accountable to social authorities. Dreaming is not only subversive, sometimes dreams also awaken us to our real and deepest feelings.

Dreaming of Tom, I saw myself crying. I was neither shocked nor embarrassed. As we say, quoting or paraphrasing a well known Richard Pryor routine, ‘what had happened was,’ I was talking to someone and felt the presence of someone else off to the side. I turned my attention to see who it was.

Though I had never known him in his youth, I was sure. It was Tom, a young Tom. I turned back to the person with whom I had been conversing and started crying. I thought Tom was dead.

I remember just before I embarked to Germany for a second time, I went to Tom’s hospital bedside.

A few days later I was in Munich and found myself visiting Dachau concentration camp.

The austere, wooden buildings were clean. There was no lingering smell of death but hard and horrible memories hung in the air, especially by the barbed-wire fences on the perimeter. I inspected faded photographs, my myopic eyes pressed nearly nose-length away from the glass-enclosed exhibits, squinting to make a closer examination of the gaunt prisoners who were literally the walking dead.

Just a few days earlier I had forced myself not to turn away from looking at my friend laying sick in a hospital bed. I had had the horrible premonition that he was going to die while I was gone.
He did.

I never thought I would have dug Germany, been comfortable there, learned so much there. America had taught me to think of Germans as “whites,” not people. On race and other matters Tom had constantly and sharply interrogated me, albeit with great affection. Rather than say I told you so, when I responded talking about what I learned or how I unexpectedly enjoyed some new or foreign experience, Tom would just pithily reply, “good.”

I loved our conversations. When I visited, if he was hard at work on a piece of writing, he would tell me so and I would ask my question and leave, but usually he paused for me and patiently listened to me babble. After a while he would ask had I considered such and such, or read so and so, or he’d point to the overstuffed book shelves and tell me to check out some guy from Uganda or an old article in *Freedomways*.

Every dwelling Tom had was open to me, including a couple to which he gave me a key. In my sixth decade, as I turn corners in my life, my life has become one of Tom’s ancestral homes. Concepts he taught or exemplified in his own being are now resurrected in me. Is that what friends are for?

My intellectual and spiritual flesh has grown out of what I learned from him, from people he introduced to me, from ideas he shared with me, places we frequented together, like: driving deserted, country byways in the heat of the Mississippi night on our way to a poetry reading or for me to sit in on one of Tom’s classes in the oxymoronically named town of “West Point,” which was located on the northeast edge of the state; or conducting the business of planning what we wanted to write or get published while we sat in Levatas Seafood House, he with oysters, I with shrimp; or the soirees with Danny Barker on Sere Street, the old musician schooling our young heads—Tom was older than me but we were both youngsters compared to Danny, whose eyes literally twinkled as he dropped witty one-liners and well-polished griot tales of early New Orleans life and the formative years of jazz; or the many beautiful midnight blue nights soaking up the blues moan and being cut to the bone by the razor-sharp guitar of Walter Wolfman Washington; and weekday evenings crowded into The Glass House enjoying not only the buckjump music of the Dirty Dozen Brass Band but also the entire ambiance, dancers, food, casual conversations, the guy at the door collecting dollars, the forty-year-old woman out-shaking the teenagers, all of that. Had Tom not taught me, had he not
shared himself with me, given me access to the New Orleans treasures he had intimately mined, would I, could I have ever become who I am?

The old folks always asked: who your people—not just your blood family, but those whom you choose to love, to emulate, to run with and respect. The wise ones knew: your people are who you become, and if not become, they are the human forces that deeply influence your becoming.

Suddenly my emotional fog lifted. At that moment his absence overwhelmed me. I retched. The cathartic urge was irrepresible, except this nausea was not released through my mouth but rather through my eyes.

In my dream I wept, openly.

But crying was not what disturbed me. What really caused unease was a psychic jab that literally shocked open my eyes and propelled me out of bed.

For the first time in over a decade since his death, I recognized a reality I had neither fully realized nor acknowledged. I miss Tom terribly. Given our thirty year friendship and his mentorship, it should have been obvious, especially to me, but then most men are reluctant to publicly admit how much they miss another man.
I guess one might say that this is a rear view perspective of my brother beginning his life in this place everyone refers to as “the world.”

When he first came into this world, his entry was like a tender bud emerging before the moist leaves were ready to release him. My mom says he was born prematurely weighing only 3 lbs wrapped thrice in a band of comfort. Well I guess he was like any other typical kid for a while. Upon reaching the age range of 7-9, he began his journey as a careless driver. Once he had knowledge of an approaching spanking, he would clothe himself in three pairs of pants and take the licks as if my dad were rubbing Vaseline on his rear end. He would tell my other two brothers “Sonny boys, take it like a man.”

Although he thought he had missed a beat, his frivolous behavior aroused my brothers’ curiosity and my dad’s fury. Once his cover was blown, he could no longer shield himself from the licks of this part of life; so he switched to another drum to develop another beat. I think this was a turning point in his life. He began smoking cigarettes at the age of 16 and has never stopped. He started playing the snare drum like no one has done before and after him. He was so talented and would have had a better life had he pursued the beat of the drum instead of the beat of the streets.

Ironically, he’s the one that took “my slack” when my brothers would push me around when my mother would leave to work two jobs that were needed to take care of four kids. Maybe stealing my homemade chocolate chips placed inside a clean glass oyster jar supposedly hidden under the clothes in my drawer was another one of his off beats. Better than that was his use of my Avon Unforgettable bath oil’s scent filling the bathroom after his departure only to respond with “I don’t know what you’re talking about?” Coming into the house after an 11 o’clock school night curfew, whistling as if he didn’t have a care in this world, or just placing his usual 16 oz. R.C. cola hold in the fridge as he held onto a bag of Rice’s potato chips. God only knows, because during those times he had a good relationship with Him, His disciples, and other biblical people. My brother never hesitated to call them one by one: “Oh Lord, John, Peter, Paul, Mark, somebody help me.” “She’s gonna kill me” were
the words that he uttered as my mother spanked him for missing the curfew again. I’ll never forget the good laughs I had as he closed the fridge door and saw my mom’s face and the black strap that graced her hand. His verbal response was “Oh no” and hers was “Oh yes.” He was also known for making family and friends laugh at his rendition of Lenny Williams’ “I love ya.” He even played the drums in the high school band and later in a nightclub with a group when he was older. Boy could he beat those drums. I guess school wasn’t his thing because he would change F’s to A’s in high school. He ceased attendance after two years of Jr. College to marry the woman he loved who had a 17-month-old son for him. This is the same lady that he physically abused after returning home from weekend drinking binges. The beats became louder and more abusive. Instead of beating a snare drum, now he’s beating his wife. I guess after 7 years she finally said that divorce was the only choice. By then she had another child, a pretty little girl, and decided to move away. Why couldn’t he continue to beat the drum? He held a good job as a supervisor at Standard Container Co., the first and highest of any black male in our hometown.

After two years of missing Mondays and maybe other days, he finally got the notice that he didn’t need. “Fired. No Longer Hired.” He sold his shares in the company stock and spent $21,000 in a span of two weeks on hotels, women, drugs, and alcohol. He’s stayed with my mom and my brother, at a Salvation Army facility, and a homeless shelter called the Stew Pot. On Wednesday, August 8, 2007, an elderly part-time employer brought him to my mom’s for shelter. He was humble at first and then became arrogant once he recognized the beat. Verbally abusive with intensity, pitch, and resonance: he needed medical intervention, but wanted no mention. He worked a part-time job 16-20 hours a week at Ryan’s. In January, he started receiving social security benefits, and his life and health began to beat an erratic cadence of drug abuse and medical erosion. Rumor is that two ladies played the beat of “Money, Money, Money” on his head with a brick. Well, the rest is history. He now lies in a hospital bed, strapped down, fighting for his life with a peck tube in his stomach. My brother, the one I loved, detested, loved, and now sympathize with because he can no longer beat his forceful cadence. Strangely coincidental, he can still move his legs and arms but the left temporal lobe that controls the speech is significantly impaired. No more fusses with me or verbal abuse for our mother. Even as he lies connected to machines, I observe him trying to beat on the bed railing. Oh how I wished he could have missed that last beat. I guess for now we’ll just take a side view perspective of determining the next beat.
February 14, 2009: it was my second parade, and my day was going well. I went to the florist, picked up a dozen of yellow roses, and got my gifts together making my way across the river. I made a stop at Walgreens on Wall and Lapalco Blvd. While leaving the parking lot, I took my phone out. Texting and driving, I noticed a police car coming beside me, so I quickly put my phone away. We traveled about three blocks. Then he put his siren on and ordered me to pull over and stop my car. He had two other squad cars behind him. I was nervous. I hurried and pulled over. The roses tilted over, and the water spilled out, Valentine’s Day nearly ruined. I pulled into a nearby parking lot, rolled my window down, and heard him screaming, “You didn’t hear my siren and see my lights it took me… Driver’s and registration out…” He couldn’t finish his statements or words once he came to the window. I didn’t even answer him because I knew what this was. He pulled me over because he thought I was a black male with dreads, until he saw I was a girl with twists. He was a black police officer stereotyping his own people.

I handed him my information. He asked again, “Did you hear my siren?” I said, “No not until you were all upon me.” He didn’t even take my info. He just said, “Be careful before those roses be on your casket.” I said ok and drove off. This wasn’t my first run in with the police because of the way I look, yet this was the first time the commotion was this huge—three squad cars behind me, screaming on the loud speaker.

Again this was a black police officer, and this is what I consider an innocence to experience situation. My great-grandfather was the first black officer on the police force in Jefferson Parish. My grandfather was a lieutenant on the force, and my dad was also an officer. I knew the ups and downs of the force. I knew there were crooked and genuinely good police who follow their mission to protect and to serve. But I heard from my father himself that they stereotype people. My dad himself said, “We have to watch those dudes with those chee-wees (referring to dreads).” Harry Lee, the captain of the Jefferson Parish Police, once promised to stop all African-American males who came into his parish.
This experience made me realize that I am a target, a target of police abuse, brutality, and stereotyping. Will that make me change the way I look? No, but it does change my outlook on police, because while they pledge to protect and serve the general public, I and those who look like me and are stereotyped daily are their targets.
“Look at Kristin. Doesn’t she look like Ms. Piggy?”

“Why does she wear all those plaits?”

“Isn’t she the ugliest thing you ever saw?”

I was constantly made fun of when I was younger because of the way I looked. At recess the other children would dance around me, taunting me, calling me all sorts of names. My parents would always tell me not to worry about it, that kids could be cruel. I began to accept the way people treated me. It became normal, part of everyday life, routine. Then God sent my angel, Larry, or Lucky, as we called him.

Although Lucky was my godbrother, I didn’t know him that well at first. I only saw him at family gatherings until June of ’95, when he came to live with us. I was ten years old, and he was sixteen, a large enough age difference. I remember when I first found out he was coming to stay with us. My plan was to let him be and stay out of his way. Why would a teenage boy want an annoying little kid around, always getting in the way? I was very apprehensive. I thought I’d become the butt of his jokes, too.

To my surprise, and everyone else’s, he took a quick liking to me and vice versa. The second day he was there, he was in the living room listening to Tupac, who was my favorite musician at the time. I told him this. We kept talking and discovered we both had a love for basketball, hip hop, and video games. We spent so much time playing basketball, listening to hip hop, and trying to outdo each other in video games.

I’m the oldest of four. In many ways Lucky was like the big brother I never had. He taught me to have more pride in myself and not worry what other people think. Not long after he moved in, he took me to the hairdresser, without my parents’ permission, to straighten my hair. He talked my mom into getting me smaller glasses. We even played lots of sports together to help me lose a few pounds. The kids at school still teased me, but it didn’t really bother me. I felt better about myself, so they couldn’t get to me.
Lucky was also very entertaining. He could dance and rap. He was very funny. He could make me laugh for hours, literally. He would turn on a tape recorder and just talk. When he’d play it back for me, I’d laugh until I cried. It was so funny. No matter how bad my day was going, he could always make me smile. That was one of his best qualities.

As we both got older, people thought we would grow apart. When he graduated from high school, everyone thought he’d stop spending so much time with me. They figured he was too old and had better things to do. This was the exact opposite of what actually happened. Age, time, and experience only strengthened our relationship. He was such a wise, thoughtful, understanding, compassionate person that I felt closer to him than I did my own parents. When I started getting older, I went to him when I had questions about life. He’d always look me in the eye and give it to me straight, no matter what I asked. I could always depend on him for good advice.

In February of 2000, my grandmother passed away. It was one of the most horrible things I’ve ever had to go through. My grandma and I were very close. After the funeral, at my parents’ house, we all gathered for dinner. I couldn’t eat. I sat in a corner crying. Lucky came over and started talking about my grandma. He reminded me of all the times she came through for me and so many others. Like the Christmas of ’98 when my dad got laid off. She made me and my brothers’ Christmas very merry. We had so many gifts. To this day I don’t know how she bought all of them on her income.

He reminded me of when Sister Jenkins’, a woman who attended church with us, electricity was shut off. My grandmother took some of her rent money to help the woman. Lucky reminded me of so many other things she’d done. Sitting there, in the corner, amongst all the grief-stricken people, eyes puffy, sniffling, looking miserable, I realized that I shouldn’t dwell on her death. Instead, I thought of the many sacrificial, extraordinary things she did in life. Although she’s dearly missed, she’s indeed in a better place.

I viewed my grandmother as our family’s foundation. When she died, I thought everything and everyone would fall apart. We were all hurting, but we all stayed strong—except Lucky. That summer I noticed a big change in him. Not in his personality nor in our relationship but in how he spent his time. He now spent most of his days and all of his nights on street corners, trying to make quick and easy money—dealing death to his own people. I told him I didn’t like it every chance
I got. He would say not to worry about it and that he had everything under control. At other times he’d deny it all.

I remember how happy he was as we sat at the dinner table on Christmas of 2000. He talked the whole time, eating plate after plate of food. He was all worked up about a trip to Cleveland, where he had family. He kept telling me it was going to be big, and when he came home he’d buy me anything I wanted.

He never did come back. Three days after New Year’s we got a call from his uncle. Lucky had been shot twice in the chest and once in the face. Gone, just like that. Dead at twenty. The best friend I ever had was taken away from me, and for what? The first thing I felt was shock. I just couldn’t believe I wouldn’t see him any more.

For the next few days, I did things as I normally would. I didn’t even cry until it hit me. He was gone, and he wasn’t coming back, ever. Next I felt anger. I was listening to the radio when the anger erupted. I just started breaking things up. After I broke a few things, I realized I wanted to hurt someone—not just anyone, but Lucky. I blamed him for leaving me. I blamed God too. I kept asking God, “Why me? Why him?” I was angry, confused, and full of hurt for a long time.

I still hurt sometimes, but mostly I smile. I think of us playing ball, telling jokes, playing video games. I laugh when I remember him dancing and freestyling. He taught me to love and respect myself and others. He showed me how to be generous and courteous and to do right by people. Because of Lucky’s untimely death, I try to live life to the fullest. I realize death is a part of life. Everyone must die; it’s inevitable. It’s what you do and how you live while you’re here that counts.

To other people, Lucky’s a statistic. Another young, black, foolish man who wanted it all too soon and too easy. To me he is a brother and a friend, who is dearly missed. I know he looks down on me every day. I just hope I make him proud.
A FRIEND I NEVER KNEW
Earnetriss Moffett, McMain Secondary School

To a friend I never knew:

We are so much alike. We like the same food and the same music. We are two different people in two different worlds. You are about to go to the NFL, while I’m trying to become a model or actress. Yet we still make time for what’s important: family, friends, and school work.

You have filled an empty hole in my heart. I always knew you existed. It’s not our fault that our father didn’t keep his family together.

I always wanted to know what you were doing in life, but since we contacted each other I know you are doing wonderful. You’ve made me proud of you.

This is to my big brother, Rob,

A friend I never knew until now!
R. I. P. BIG HEAD WAYNE

Darrow Reaux, Frederick Douglass High School

My uncle got killed in the East around Cornet Court.
On the news they said two women fled away in a dark-colored Astro van.
He was walking and talking to my cousin, when the culprits came.
My cousin said my uncle begged for his life, and they still killed him.
He was killed on the scene—7 shots, 4 in the face, 3 on the body,
but the police still haven’t solved the case.
My uncle didn’t bother nobody. He was just a motor bike boy,
so heaven has a real thug, a father, a uncle, a brother, a cousin and a friend.
I went to the funeral to see my uncle one last time,
to tell him good-bye and share one last cry.
R.I.P. Big Head Wayne,
your body and soul and sound of your motor cycle will always remain.
The night before my sister called with the news, I was sitting in the mustard yellow and grass green restaurant, O’Henry’s, with my best friend turned boyfriend, turned ex, turned best friend again Smokey. He reminded me of a scene I hadn’t thought about since sophomore year of college when it happened. Smokey said, after carefully watching me stuff a fork full of loaded fries down my mouth, “I miss making love to you.” I laughed loudly at the thought of us and how surprised he was at the little-girl-turned-woman he had known for more than 17 years. Smokey is the only person in the world I could talk to about any and everything without ever having to feel embarrassed or ashamed. So we each took turns recounting various acts of love and laughed like we were laughing at two different people, not us, not the people at this table loaded with food, not these same bodies. I was happy to see his smile. On the drive to the restaurant Smokey had expressed serious thoughts of suicide. After taking a huge gulp of his Sprite he hooted, “Man, we did some wild and crazy stuff.” I too took a gulp of my tea.

The rain had just tapered off, and I had just finished watching one of my favorite movies when my sister, Kenda, called to tell me that her best friend Michelle had finally confessed a truth Kenda and I had already known. Michelle’s 25-year-old brother, Michael, did in fact have HIV and was now in a wheelchair. No longer able to take care of himself, Michael was on his way to what Michelle called, “a living facility.” My heart was resting on my bladder. I cradled my lower stomach to feel if it was still beating. My brain whirled around until the only thing hanging in the after breeze of a whizzing mind was Chantel. Chantel was the cousin I had recently buried due to AIDS. She was 26 and leaves in her memory two small traumatized babies, a mother and father who a year and a half earlier buried my little cousin Mike, and two brothers, the older of which is living with HIV himself. Since her death, I have had the strange feeling that Chantel is haunting me. Or maybe it is the sore reality that I had forgotten about her while she was here. I hadn’t seen her in about four years. The saddest part about it is that we lived in the same city. When I ran into my uncle Ronnie or my
cousins Mike or Baby, I didn’t even ask about her. Now in the aftermath of her death, I feel the need to ask questions that maybe only she could answer. I want to know how she felt when she knew she was going to die. Or if the backseat, backyard, backroom sex she had was worth the disease she acquired. Or if promiscuous sex was even the culprit. After all, she was a drug user and needles her choice medium into the underworld. I want to know her two children’s names and ages. I had only seen them once in their whole entire existence, and I doubt seriously that they could give an educated guess as to who I am.

Since she is no longer here, I ask my sister.

“Kenda, don’t they know that there are medicines that could prolong Michael’s life? Don’t they know it’s not good to be ignorant? That silence would hurt him more than help?”

“I don’t know Ashley,” my sister snarled like older siblings do when the younger ones need to be restrained. Being a well-trained younger sibling, I become quiet. “I’ll call you later,” Kenda said and hung up the phone before I could say goodbye. Falling back on the eggshell white sofa in the living room, my thoughts landed on Smokey and me. During our sexual relationship we were quite reckless, and being lucky, we were not going to die from it.

On the ride to the restaurant I had been trying to convince Smokey that we were indeed very lucky. Unlike most of the people we grew up calling our friends, we were in our early twenties and had no children, no divorces, were not in prison and the biggest blessing of all, we were not dead. See, Smokey and I represent a generation marked by violence, insecurities and ignorance. We were not supposed to make it. Especially Smokey. He started selling drugs and running with a much older crowd by 13. By 15 he was “big ballin” and out of control. His mother battled crack addiction and alcoholism most of our young lives, and his daddy, who is now like a best friend, was never really around. Smokey had played Russian roulette with his future since the beginning, and just about everyone was betting that he was going to lose.

I remember the day Ega, Smokey’s friend, was murdered for participating in the same drug game Smokey had gotten out of some years before. We drove to a park where people rarely go. I nestled my body into the crack between the passenger side door and the seat. Smokey fixed his eyes on the rearview mirror, almost like he was watching a movie of his past playing in front of him. He told me that he found Ega and that Ega looked at him before taking his final breath.
Tears were falling down Smokey’s eyes, and he told me that they were not for Ega but for me. He said that he couldn’t stand to lose me, that every time I got on a plane to go somewhere it made him nervous. He said that I was the only person he would go crazy over if I left him. Smokey took a deep breath and looked at me. The initially slow rolling tears careening down his cheeks illuminated for the first time a softness I had never seen.

I didn’t cry. Instead I watched every tear fall off the slope of his face.

I tried hard to think of a silver lining in the gloomy, dingy cloud hovering over the moment. I couldn’t find one and told Smokey to bring me home.

People might call Smokey and me survivors, survivors of our own rowdy past, of our mistakes, of our secret disappointments and horrors. But the question looming in his mind that night in the car is the same as the one that has taunted and pushed me my whole life. How long? I tried to answer this question for Smokey. Instead I uttered, “just hold on.” I found that same question seething in me at that very moment. I had never really told Smokey that just like him, I have been and still am in the fight of my life. For him, just like many others of my close friends, I’ve always seemed to have it easy. I grew up with two great parents who didn’t do drugs, who didn’t beat or curse me. I have loving brothers and sisters, and I always managed to do very well in school without ever having to study. I could never form the habit. What Smokey doesn’t know is that I struggle with the thought that maybe I wasn’t supposed to survive.

Like Smokey, I do not come from a family of achievers. Most of my family members have never graduated high school, let alone college. None of them have traveled outside of the state or country as I have. Most of the women have become teenage mothers before reaching the age of 17, and if drugs and alcohol didn’t stunt the growth of the males, then their young fatherhood and the responsibility of it has. Most of them are proud of me and maybe a bit jealous. I am often treated like the special one. I get inquiries about my jobs, my experiences, my life. I am glorified as the odd man out, but why do I feel strangely similar?

I have been examining myself for years. I have mentally noted all of my worst traits and tendencies. I can have a monstrous temper with a serious violent streak to boot. I find myself sometimes hanging with the wrong crowd just to be reminded of the me I was years ago. I have even succumbed to the urge to dumb myself down in certain arenas so
as not to scare off or make ashamed the “common folk” that comprise my close family and friends. I realize that I have even played Russian roulette with my own future in the past.

Like my junior year at 35 when I allowed a few of my neighborhood friends who were running from the police to stuff their plastic bags of crack and money in the pockets of my plaid pants and maroon jacket, which I always kept wrapped around my waist no matter the weather. And how I had assigned myself the dangerous task of having to walk about the 3rd ward to locate each of them to give back their paraphernalia before the police or my mother could catch me. I was asked to do it because of my uniform. No cop would expect a female from McDonogh 35 to be holding. I didn’t quite believe the theory, since I had been with them on shakedowns and was often times spotted with them on my aunt’s porch by the police.

Or the time in college when I found myself arrested and almost jailed when the two friends I was hanging with had weapons and weed on them. I didn’t know about the weapons or the weed, but then again, I didn’t know too much about these friends, since I had just met them on the street that Saturday afternoon.

At the time, I did not consider these actions and many others to be destructive. But now I understand that at certain times I have attempted to commit an emotional suicide. I had purposely planted myself in the crossfire of potentially dangerous situations just to see how well I could dodge the bullets. So that I could show off the leg or the arm or the stomach scarred and singed by a much too close call. Like Smokey and the many survivors of Hurricane Katrina shuffling their way back to New Orleans, I am suffering from survivor’s guilt. How does one react when it is discovered that out of a block of 50 demolished homes, yours is the only one battered but still standing? Is it possible to be proud of yourself for having the tenacity to hang on to whatever it is sustaining your life while your friends and family are drowning and drifting away in the same murky waters that are keeping you afloat? How can you explain your survival? How can we have second lines and sit in cool, air conditioned restaurants with loaves of French bread spilling over with shrimp or catfish or oysters on our plates? How can you pick up the pieces when so many lives have been shattered?

Thinking about the strength and courage of the people of New Orleans, I have become clearer about Smokey’s thoughts of suicide and my own
attempts. The survivor must make a choice. Do I continue to struggle or let go? In too many cases it would be so much easier to let go of all of your dreams, your goals and submerge yourself into the hungry waters waiting to suck out your breath. It might even be appeasing, since you know exactly how you will end up. The unknown is always scary. And most survivors not only live with the guilt of surviving but the fear of it. Surviving means a continuous effort to stay strong, to do well, to heal and recover from atrocities.

I looked into Smokey’s eyes that night and thought of friends who didn’t make it. I wanted to tell him that the worst was over, that we had beaten the odds. That we were made stronger because of it and even if we failed, we wouldn’t completely drown because our lungs could now withstand the pressure of the water closing in. In my heart I wanted to believe that our fight was over, but I couldn’t lie. I just looked at him and whispered, “Just hold on.”
HOW MY BROTHER BECAME A THUG

Michael Chancely, McMain Secondary School

The story of how my 14-year-old brother became a thug is so complex, I can’t think of where to begin. I should probably start at the end. Right now, at 8:04 pm, January 10, 2004, I’m sitting at my new laptop typing this article while I wait for the police. Tonight my father did something that I usually would detest, though I think it is okay as a last resort tonight. My Dad called the police because of a fight between my brother and me.

We got in a fight because I pushed my brother after he booted up to me about the tenth time that day. He punched me in my eye, and it still hurts as I type. I probably shouldn’t have provoked him to hit me by pushing him, but I didn’t think he’d fight me like that. I was sick and tired of him boasting about the fight he won at Colton Middle School the previous day. He is now suspended until he has a court hearing.

He wouldn’t tell me the details of the fight except that it was self-defense, but according to my friend’s younger brother and sister who attend Colton, the fight had something to do with gangs or ward beef. I believe in self-defense when there is no way out of the fight. My brother did tell me that the fight was a continuation of events from the day before. It could have possibly been retaliation. After trying to piece the story together from several accounts of what happened, I believe my brother is too young and naïve to know the difference between self-defense and retaliation.

I have no proof, but I believe the fight started from a three track CD my brother and his friends made. They call themselves “SRB,” or the “St. Roch Boyz.” The lyrics on the CD are about killing and ward beef. I believe in freedom of speech, but I also realize that there can be consequences for the words we say. In my brother’s case, consequences include facing violence from people from different wards, as well as having to live up to the violent image his music glorifies.

When I first listened to the CD a week ago, I asked my brother why he raps about killing, drug dealing, and gang fights—a lifestyle of which
he has little knowledge. He responded, “Nobody want hear no raps ‘bout me just chillin’, going to school, and playing ball.” He wants to follow in the footsteps of his favorite rappers such as Lil’ Wayne, Squad, and Soulja Slim.

I may be unfair to say that these rappers are the sole reason for my brother’s violent actions lately, because I’ve always listened to their lyrics, and I consider myself to be a non-violent person. So many factors contributed to my brother trying to be a thug. Is the obsession of wanting to be a famous rapper the main reason?

Not all, but many gangsta rappers don’t stress that there is a price to pay if one wants to live the life of a thug. The products of thug life that music videos show are money, women, and fame. What my brother doesn’t see are those thugs who weren’t fortunate enough to get a record contract. Many are dead, in prison, or have nothing to fall back on.

Many rappers also don’t show why some people are thugs. Many people are thugs as a last resort to raise their family or because of their environment. My brother only wants to be a thug to support a lavish lifestyle he sees in the 50 Cent or Cash Money videos.

I’ve seen rappers say that we use their music as a scapegoat. I’ve even told people that rap doesn’t create violence. Now, I’ve seen my brother become a victim of the negative messages in rap music.

My brother is at a stage in his life when he is easily influenced. Just as we must learn the difference between Looney Toons and real-life, it’s time someone teaches him that music violence isn’t and doesn’t have to be real. Right now I choose to not preach to my brother, because we still have some tension. I hope he reads this essay before it’s too late.
THE UNKNOWN LOVE
LaShanta Williams, Warren Easton High School

How could I love such a person
without knowing what he is or what he looks like?

It was a feeling
That was so out of sight.

“You’re going to love him,”
Was all I heard.

How could I ask my mind this question
Without speaking a word?

No picture, name
Or identification.

Oh my;
What a scared sensation.

I don’t want to meet him.

I’m scared.

He doesn’t even know me.

How could I love him without knowing
What’s to be?

It’s impossible to give out love
To someone you haven’t met.

Oh, but little did I know.

I had a surprise waiting just yet.

Curly hair, 10 fingers and toes.

Goodness! Look at his little ear lobes.

Those sparkling, brown,
Beautiful round eyes.
I think I’m starting to feel this
Unknown love coming from inside.
I get it!
I finally understand.
The unknown love I’m supposed to feel
Is for my new born baby brother,
Who is a long away from becoming a man.
I guess it’s true
What they say.
You never know how much you love
A person until you see him.
This was my unknown gift
From the man high above.
It was my cute, unborn
Baby bro who had
My Unknown Love.
DEAR BROTHER

Ieasha Burnett, Frederick Douglass High School

Brother, it hasn’t been the same without you. I’m trying to hold my head up out here, but without you things don’t seem to be the same. I miss all the things we did together as a family. Now your momma, sister, brother, son and I sometimes wake up at night, 3:00 in the morning, thinking you’re home. And to make sure I check your room and see if you really are there. Looking in your room, knowing you’re not there is making me more mad.

It makes me want to go out and do something wild. I know what you were doing was wrong, but you had to do whatever it takes to feed your family, pushing keys from L.A. to N.O. ain’t no joke, and having 15 years in jail all because of coke ain’t going to work.

You have a son to look after. I remember what you told me, that you will be there for your son and you will do whatever it takes to raise your son. Well how will you be there for him when you’re in jail all the time? And how long will it take for my nephew to be “encore” in the streets, all because he don’t have a father on hand to look up to. Remember when you told me that you aren’t a baby’s daddy, you’re a baby’s father?

I hope when you are in jail you make a change. And why haven’t you been calling me? I know why—because it hurts. Talk to mama just so she can hear your voice. That will make her happy through the whole day and will also help your time go by fast.

OK, brother. I don’t have nothing else to say, but until pen meets paper, I love you and miss you and hope you come home soon.
“Man I’m tired of this. Why do they treat me like a prisoner already? I wonder if I was white would society treat me any differently, and honestly I think they would. I feel that all they think about me is a criminal, gangster, thug, drug dealer, or crack head. Like I’m not capable of doing something positive with my life because of my skin color.

“I guess society figures it’s ok to treat me like this, if I’m going to end up in jail anyway. Because if not I wouldn’t have to go through metal detectors just to go in school, be watched all day by 32 security guards, and spend my days barely learning anything.

“If they cared about me, I would have enough teachers, a desk to sit in, and the freedom to walk in school like any other person. Because if they keep treating me like a criminal, that’s all I have to look forward to in the future. It doesn’t matter what I want to be in life, because society will treat me like a prisoner anyway. If society loved me, it would give me a normal school, where I have a chance to do something positive with my life and learn something new for a change.”

I’m tired of my brother complaining to me and my parents, and nothing is happening. I thought if I become his voice, speak from his heart, and see from his eyes, maybe something can change. I don’t want the man I love so much to feel this way inside. Because from a sister’s eyes I know he’s crying inside. I think if we start treating our black men like human beings and not like criminals, we maybe can help change our society forever. I think it’s worth a try.
Auntie B’s famous, home-made peach ice cream was a big deal at every family function on my father’s side. She would round up all the children to help her. By the time I was about 5 or 6, all my cousins thought they were too old to make ice cream. So that just left me eagerly ready to help.

It was hard work that I took seriously. I made sure every bucket was filled with peaches. I concentrated on crushing the ice perfectly so that there were no lumps.

I distributed my hard work to everyone in the family. I made sure I saved the best cup I made for my older brother Michael.

He had changed since I saw him last summer. His toned, athletic body was skinny. He had black sores all over his arms, legs, and face. His nose was eaten up, and the skin was peeling.

His body was shaking and twitching as I gave him the ice cream. I watched him as he ate it, waiting for his approval. As he embarked on his third spoonful, his body started shaking violently. He threw the ice cream on the ground. “What the fuck is this shit!” he yelled. He fell over on the ground as tears started to roll down my face.

His body started reacting to the mix of drugs he took moments before. At the time, I didn’t know my older brother was a drug addict.

I thought that he was cursing me. I thought he hated me and my peach ice cream.

As my uncle carried him out of sight, I stood crying as his cup of ice cream melted in the grass.

I’ve never made it again.
A SON/STUDENTS I LOVE AND HATE
Cynthia Van Dam, teacher

In the Students at the Center workshop for McMain teachers and the interns, 12th grade students who assist teachers in lower grade classes wrote about fathers who weren’t responsible, who abused and were forgiven—or not. I want to write about a flip side. What about my son who tore my heart out and stomped on it. Surviving his adolescence forced me to mourn the death of the son I expected to have. But my son is still living. How do I relate to this child?

I thought my son and I had worked out a relationship. He grew up when he couldn’t depend on us for help after Katrina. Now that he’s older, I can talk to him about his brothers and sisters. He understands himself and helps me understand them as he looks back on his life and our relationship. But then came the confession, the accusations of abandonment, the manipulative request for help, and the crazy “which way is up” drowning feeling… again.

Now he claims to have been reborn after a mystical experience. Does he know how many times I have tried to tell him the same things he saw in those visions? I am angry that he sees from the vision, but not from my words. But maybe Freire would tell me that I only failed because narration will always fail. Were my words like Shug’s research? They couldn’t answer the question because he just needed a few years to get older. Did the visions help him access his memories, so he can make them part of his reality instead of repressing them? What about the work he is going to have to do now that the visions are over. Neither birth nor rebirth are easy processes. They require hours of PUSHING. My son will have to push against the annoyances of life and the feeling of abandonment he has because he was given up for adoption.

These are personal questions and musings I have to ponder as I try to understand how to forgive and relate to my son. How much do I offer him love and acceptance, so he can get over those issues? How much do I need to push him to be a man? Why should my vision of manhood control his life? While these are personal questions, they relate to the questions we have struggled with in our workshop. Can you be where...
you are without memory? What is a healthy relationship? How much do I forgive my son or do you forgive an abusive father or boyfriend? How much space for growth is safe? How do we mentor/teach students?

My class has to prepare students for LEAP/GEE. Is teaching like the birth process? Is my classroom like a giant vagina? Do I PUSH my students through and out to prepare them for life? I also struggle with grades and discipline. How much do I forgive my students for being teenagers or for not getting work done on time? How much do I push them to do the work of learning? We talk about controlling a class, but when I looked control up in the thesaurus, synonyms included: influence, rule, dictate, manipulate, dominate, oppress. Is that what we mean? Is that what we do?

I know I have to prepare for testing, but I have always wanted to prepare my students for life by helping them connect with the themes and ideas in literature; however, in my pushing to prepare for tests and control I didn’t find the space to let students open up. Story circles, reciprocal teaching, and writing circles give my students that space to explore and share. Maybe the metaphor is wrong. I’m not giving birth, so I don’t need to push. I’m working with my students and son to cultivate a space where we can bloom together.
LIKE MOTHER, UNLIKE DAUGHTER
Darnechia McGrew, McDonogh 35 High School

“I never asked for this feeling.
I never thought I would fall.
I never knew how I felt ’til the day you were gone.
I was lost. I never asked for red roses.
I wasn’t looking for love.
Somehow, I let my emotions take hold, and guess what….
All at once I’m in love.”

It was late at night, and as I lay comfortably in my queen-size bed, I listened to these words exit my radio. I continuously stared at my eggshell-colored walls, and all sorts of actors and actresses, rappers, sports icons, models, and singers were staring back at me. Although they all were different, they appeared to have one thing in common. It seemed as though they all knew what was on my mind... David Miller.

David, a 5’9” tall male, has a milk chocolate skin complexion and more waves in his hair than Lake Pontchartrain. David has had one of the most significant effects on my life, and he probably doesn’t even know it. For years I’ve been afraid to fall in love, but David helped me shake those uneasy feelings.

David was the first person to make me no longer afraid to love or be loved. One rainy day in December, David and I sat for hours in my powder blue Ford Escort talking. He asked me a number of questions to see why I was afraid of love. He asked me things like, “Have you ever been hurt? Have you ever had a serious relationship? Do you push people away when they get too close?” He even asked if I am afraid of commitment.

No one has ever tried to see why I was afraid to love, but he did. When I am with him, I know no harm can come my way. He never lets anyone talk to me any kind of way, and he lets no one hit me, playing or not. Words can’t explain how deeply I feel for David. When the sun peeks through my curtains in the morning, he’s the first person I think of. When I’m in class studying science, I think of the chemistry David and
I have together. When my pupils start talking to the back of my eyelids, he’s still on my mind.

After endless days and nights thinking about him, I’ve come to realize I’m in love. When we are together, my face just lights up as I look into his eyes. Although I am proud to see how I have allowed myself to love, I still have one large concern. As we grow closer and closer to each other, I start to worry about what may happen when the issue of sex comes in. Although I want him mentally and lust for him physically, my body cringes when I think about being a pregnant teen like my mom was.

Not long ago, my mom and I had a discussion on what it was like to be a pregnant teen. She described to me how afraid she was to be a teen mom. “I was afraid to tell my mom, because we didn’t communicate well,” she explained. “I thought I would have to drop out of school to take care of you, and if I did that I wouldn’t be able to go to college.” My mom always told me how all she wanted to do after high school was go off to college. After getting pregnant her junior year in high school, she no longer had the opportunity to experience living away from home.

Like many African Americans of the 1980’s, my mom lived in a local housing development. She was 16 years old and was dating my father, Joseph Deon Mixon. She and my father had previously had talks of becoming a sexually active couple, but like me, she too was afraid of getting pregnant.

At the time, her mom and dad were struggling to survive, and they couldn’t afford to have an addition to the family. My mom thought about this, but not for too long. Not long after discussing becoming sexually active did my mom make her decision. In October of 1983, my mom walked into her bedroom just as normal, but my dad wasn’t too far behind. Anxious, and still a virgin, my mom lay down with her innocence and got up with a sense of womanhood.

This image of her plays repeatedly in my head as I replace the faces with those of David’s and mine. It would be heavenly to lie in his arms and let him physically give me the moon and stars, but am I mentally prepared? Just as that thought crossed my mind, the phone rang.

“Hello!” I said disgusted.

“Hey bay, I was just thinking about you.”

“David?”
“Yep!”

I smiled in a conniving manner, and replied, “You wouldn’t believe the thoughts I’ve had about you.” We talked for about 30 minutes before I told him I had homework.

After I hung up the phone, a gust of wind flew by. It felt like the wind sucked all the excitement out of me. I sat at the end of my bed with my feet planted firmly on the cream carpet below. Slowly I leaned over and buried my face into my nervously shaking hands. My stomach started to rumble, and the feeling of sickness hit me head on. My hands and face started to sweat profusely. I felt nauseated, and I couldn’t understand why. In a matter of seconds I went from sitting on the end of my bed, to kneeling helplessly over the bathroom trash can.

I gradually pulled away from the trash can and leaned slightly against the freshly waxed oak cabinets. I looked up at the toilet, feeling disappointed because I couldn’t make it there. I sat silently on the floor. As water ran from my eyes, I saw the reflection of my tears in the blue toilet seat cover. The cover was filled with water droplets, and somehow they seemed like my own.

I got up hesitantly to go empty the garbage bag. I walked into the poorly lit garage and dropped the bag in a more durable garbage can. I walked back into my room, and as I heard the voices of Bubba Sparxx and Jada Kiss, I began to feel better. Music has always been the highlight of my life.

I went back to doing my homework, but I couldn’t really concentrate. It was bothering me that I didn’t know what was wrong with me. I remembered eating cereal an hour earlier. Curious, I got up to go see the expiration date on the milk. It read January 12, 2002. Today was January 14, 2002, so that’s definitely why I threw up.

Seventeen years ago, my mom also walked into her bathroom vomiting, just as I had done today. Unfortunately, she could not just say the cause was spoiled milk.

“I remember it like it was yesterday,” she told me. “After I got up and walked out of the bathroom, I was about to go up the concrete steps. Each step was covered with black rubber for grip, but I held on to the railings anyway. When I got to the third step, my mom stopped me and asked me what was wrong. I said nothing and continued to make my way up the stairs.”
As my mom told her story, I thought about how she had explained to me for weeks my aunt had been telling my grandmother she was pregnant.

After my mom made it to the top of the stairs, she went into her room. Her room had one set of bunk beds, and she shared the room with 3 kids. Somehow she made her way to the top bunk, and she just lay there.

“I felt really bad,” she explained. “How could this happen to me? It was so ironic I got pregnant my first time. The whole time I was in the bed, more and more emotions mixed with my sickness. Not only was I feeling bad, but also I was now afraid my mom would find out. I was lonely and needed the father of my child there with me. Most of all, I was concerned with the type of lifestyle I would provide my child with.

“In the next 45 minutes, my mom came upstairs and again asked me what was wrong. I looked her in the eyes and lied. My mom swallowed all of her fears and asked me, ‘Stephanie, are you pregnant?’ I looked up with tears in my eyes and said, ‘a little bit.’

“My mom had a look of sadness and disappointment in her eyes. She stood speechless, but somehow she managed to tell me she was taking me to the clinic on tomorrow. It was no surprise to see the appearance of the clinic. The walls that were once white were covered with dirt, grease, and grime from people’s hands. The clinic was filled with screaming children and all sorts of pregnant women. Homeless women, black, white, and even Asian women were all lined up to take advantage of the clinic’s free services. It was a horrible place to be in, and yet I put my own self in this predicament.

“A nurse stepped out of a small room and hollered ‘Next!’ She showed no type of concern. I drug myself into the room and sat on the examination table. The nurse nonchalantly handed me a cup and told me to urinate in it. Gradually I removed myself from the table to do as I was told. When I came back, I gave the nurse the cup. She exited the room, and within 10 minutes she was back. ‘Well, you’re a mom now.’ She stuck her head out of the door and once again hollered ‘Next!’ As tears rolled down my cheeks, I got up to take my undeveloped child out of such a negative environment.

“The first thing I did was go home and tell your dad I was pregnant. He said okay, and that was it. Since he seemed so unconcerned, I got off the phone with him. Once again I crawled to the top bunk. I lay there in my bed, dying on the inside and crying on the outside. I thought
it was the end of my life, but it turned out to be the best thing that happened to me.

“Darnechia, before I had you, I had to change the direction of my life. Although I didn’t get to go off to college, I still graduated from a local university. After you were born, I learned a lot about responsibility. I could no longer buy everything for me, because I now had to support you. Being a teen mom taught me every dark cloud has a silver lining.”

It was late at night, and my mom was getting tired. “Nikki, I’ll leave you with these words: Living for yourself is hard, living for you and someone else is harder. Don’t make the same mistake I did. Close my door, and cut off the light on your way out.”

I did exactly as my mom said when I left out of her room. I walked into my room with my mom’s words on my mind. Constantly David is on mind, but so is pregnancy. It took me one last time to hear my mom’s story to make up my mind. Yes, I am in love, but no I’m not sexually active. David understands and respects my decision. My mom has taught me teen pregnancy is not to be taken lightly. It’s a very serious issue.

At 2:00 in the morning, with David on my mind, I fell asleep listening to these words: “Here and now, I want to take a lover’s vow. I want you to come with me now. Let’s make tonight the first night of a love eternal. Day and night, we’ll have an everlasting ride. I want to feel it shining bright. Let’s make tonight the first night of a love eternal.”

With fear in my heart, and doubt in my mind, I still wonder about the night. The night David and I make the first night of a love eternal. Right now wondering is just fine; I’m really enjoying my life as a teen.
“Don’t listen to what other people say,” my mom always told me. See I was used to listening to what people would say and agreeing to them and not even thinking twice. Thankfully I took her advice, and it played a major role in my relationship with Kevin. Instead of listening I basically disregarded the comments other people would say about Kevin, even though they were comments that were harsh to him and also me.

When I first decided to talk to my now-boyfriend Kevin, I told him that I just wanted to be his friend, even though deep down inside I did want to be his girlfriend. I told him I wasn’t ready for a boyfriend. The real reason was because I was too worried about what other people would say about him being white. I was so worried about other people’s opinions that I wasn’t listening to myself. As time went by I started having stronger feelings for Kevin, and I couldn’t hide them. I found myself spending more and more time with him and getting closer to him.

One person who did not like the fact that I liked a white person was my sister’s boyfriend’s brother Deuce. He liked me and tried to do everything to convince me to give up on Kevin. He would call me and ask me, “do you still like that white boy?” And every time I would say “yes.” He then would say, “I could do better for you. Kevin is a white boy. You need a black boy.” He would say stuff about Kevin like he knew him, but he didn’t know him at all. He was saying all of that, because he was jealous and wanted us to break up. After that I stopped talking to Deuce and focused myself more on Kevin. Actually Deuce brought Kevin and me more together.

Finally after three months of being friends I decided to be Kevin’s girlfriend. I was so happy, but Kevin’s friend wasn’t so happy about him dating a black girl. He commented to Kevin saying, “Why are you dating her? She’s not even that pretty, and she’s not smart.” When Kevin told me this, it hurt my feelings so bad. It hurt my feelings, because I didn’t know someone who hardly knew me could feel this way about me. Kevin said that he did not feel that way about me at all and that his friend was crazy for thinking that.
Deuce and Kevin’s friend weren’t the only people telling me about Kevin. Two people who I thought would be the last to say something did. I heard them say the meanest things about Kevin. They would say, “you could find someone better.” “When he goes off to college, he’s going to leave you and cheat on you.” Those comments were so harsh. All this time I thought the people who would actually support me didn’t even want me to be with Kevin. I knew all of those comments weren’t true. Even though they hurt a lot, I had to ignore them, because they didn’t know Kevin the way I do.

All of the harsh things the people said made me love and care for Kevin even more. They made me stronger. You can’t always listen to what other people say to you, because they’re not always right. If I would have listened to them, I wouldn’t be with Kevin now. I am glad I didn’t listen to other people for once.
I’ve been thinking about him a lot lately. I don’t want to miss him, but I do.

As my Jessica Simpson ringtone played I got butterflies.

“Hello.”

“Hey you.”

“Hey, what you doin?”

“Sitting outside of 2644 Florida Ave. Come outside.”

For some reason I did not mind how he would just stop by. As I approached the front door I did not hear his dark purple Dodge Ram revving outside. Instead he straddled a lime green and black Honda motor bike.

“Boy you and all of your toys,” I said and then smiled.

“Get on.”

“No”

“Why?”

“Because I value my life.”

We stood outside. We talked, hugged, and kissed. He then rode off. I watched him as he disappeared. For some reason I think he knew that I would not get on that motorcycle because of the fact that I told him “no” every time he asked, “if I get a motorcycle, will you ride with me?”

Katrina took that motorcycle and in so many ways she took Darnell too.

He met me in a parking lot at LSU, where I attended after the hurricane. We had lunch and we talked.

“You know, I almost bitched up and cried. I was in my house for eight months and this shit happened.”
I would usually scold him because of his language, but my mind was on the fact that he had a house and I did not know. He told me that he came on his motorcycle that night to supposedly bring me to his house. If he really wanted me to know where he lived, he would have come over in his truck. There is a lot that he did not share with me, like where he lived. As I think about it, I did not share a lot of things with him either, like how after time had passed I knew that God hadn’t placed him in my life but I did with a little help from the devil.
She said it was a bad idea. She said we had no business being out that late. We were only fourteen. Then to think we barely even knew these boys, and we were riding around with them? What was wrong with us? Did our consciousness just up and leave us the moment we stepped foot in the car? Where was it the first drink? The first blunt? I guess we just didn’t care and had our night in the name of fun.

I had to think quickly. My first evasion was, “I can’t do this. Not without a condom.” As I lay trapped on the bed with the weight of a nineteen year old [man] holding my body stationary, keeping my arms from pushing him away, I needed an excuse, a stall. I needed a miracle.

The aroma of weed clogged the air, leaving me with little senses due to lack of clean oxygen. I couldn’t think quickly enough. I tried to talk loudly, praying that someone would unexpectedly walk in the room and save me. But with each attempt to cause concern, I was only pinned down harder, and eventually my mouth was covered. I bit my tongue and shut my eyes to avoid crying, but my attempts were unsuccessful. With silent tears rolling down my cheeks, I regretted not listening to my friend, and I knew I should’ve left when she did.

It all started after a football game. Two of my closest friends and I decided we wanted to go out and have fun, so we called up some boys to come and pick us up. Not thinking things through, and failing to realize that three young girls packed in a Tahoe with six notably older boys was a bad idea, we went for the ride.

After about an hour of just riding around, one of the boys asked if we wanted a daiquiri. One of the other girls and I immediately said yeah, but my other friend declined, saying she didn’t think it was a good idea to not be in our right state of mind. “For real y’all,” she said, “We really don’t need to be drinking. Who knows what these boys wanna do to us. I think we should just go for the ride and go home.”

Ignoring her, we went to the daiquiri shop. A little loosened up after receiving drinks, we became more touchy feely with the boys. Our comfort level with them rose as the drinks went down, so we assumed
it was no big deal when one of them asked if we wanted to go over to his place to chill. He said he didn’t stay far from where I lived, so he would bring me home afterwards. I said, “whatever” and agreed to go, along with the same friend who had before. The third declined yet again, but this time she actually called for someone to come and pick her up, saying that she wasn’t going to let these boys take advantage of her like they most likely would if given the opportunity to.

What started as a 3 to 6 girl/boy ratio became 2 to 6. Unfortunately our fourteen-year-old brains didn’t tell us that continuing on with these boys was a bad and just plain stupid idea and that we would possibly regret it later.

Two girls, six boys, alcohol, and weed: What an amazing mixture. Now at the house, we each branched off into different rooms. A little drunk and a little high, I asked where the bathroom was. The boy whose house it was took me to a room that wasn’t the bathroom, and he closed the door behind us. In shock, I asked him what he was doing. He replied, “It’s time you stopped playing games with me, you know what’s up.” From there he proceeded to push me towards the bed, saying that he’d been waiting to get me in a room alone with him.

Frightened, I tried to push him away, but his strength overpowered mine. As I cried, I accepted the realization that this was going to happen regardless of how I felt. He had gotten my underwear off, and I immediately grabbed his penis to prevent insertion. He removed his hand from my mouth to move my hand, and I took this opportunity to scream. After several attempts, someone finally entered the room to see what was wrong.

It was one of the other boys. He instantly grabbed the boy off me and punched him in the face. The time they spent fighting allowed me to re-dress and flee the room to find my friend. At the sight of my tears she became concerned, asking what the problem was. After informing her of the situation we left and walked to my house where our night ended.

This night of “fun” almost became a tragic event for me. By skipping all precautions and ignoring the helpful advice of a friend, I was a few seconds away from becoming a rape victim. I could’ve easily been scarred for life in exchange for a fun night. I can say I made a lot of foolish decisions that night, all of which could have been avoided if only I had taken heed to what my friend was saying.
I SHOULD HAVE LISTENED, PART 2
Shelby Hollmon, McMain Secondary School

My trust level for boys had gone down tremendously. I no longer felt comfortable being too close too soon. After that night, everything that “could’ve” happened lingered in my thoughts. It remained far enough away that it didn’t overwhelm me but close enough that it was impossible to forget. Either way it was there, and it contributed majorly in my interaction with boys.

It took me over a year to let my guard down and become close to a boy again. Also in this time frame I acknowledged my interest in females as well. I had these feelings for females prior to the incident, but since boys weren’t favorable any more, I decided to play on both sides of the field for a couple of months.

After a while, I finally settled down with someone, a boy, and I felt that he was a good person for me. Although our relationship wasn’t that great (I felt that way then, but now when I look back on it, the relationship was indeed horrible), I found myself trusting him. This was a key step for me, but I foolishly believed that he deserved my trust. We had been dating for quite a while, and things were carrying on pretty smoothly. That is until one Sunday in April when everything changed.

My boyfriend and I had a discussion about celibacy. I informed him that I didn’t want to be sexually active any more. He was upset about it, but he reluctantly agreed. We went on without any problems, disagreements, or sex for a while, and that led me to believe that our relationship was going to work out.

Then arrived that Sunday. That dreadful, unforgettable April Sunday.

My boyfriend came over to my house, and we were having a great time: Playing around, acting silly, just having fun. As night drew near, we lay down to watch TV. He began to kiss me, and from there I instinctively knew what his intentions were. Playfully, I pushed him away, thinking he would back off.

He didn’t. Now seriously, I asked him what he was doing. “We just talked about this, and we mutually agreed not to have sex.” He
continued kissing me, pleading to let him just “taste” me. After hitting him several times he stuck it in me.

I couldn’t get up, I couldn’t move him, and it was hopeless to scream because it wouldn’t be heard. All I could do was cry. I cried and cried, and I became disgusted with myself for allowing this to happen to me. I promised myself to never be put in an uncompromising situation where this would be the concluding result, but at the time I didn’t know it wasn’t my fault.

After he finished, he noticed my tears and started apologizing for what he had done. When I was finally capable of getting up, I pushed him from me, and we began fighting. (At the time I was aiming to beat the crap out of him, but now I wish I would’ve had a gun because he’d be dead.) The fight led out of the room and eventually to the front door where I made him leave.

That dreadful, unforgettable, April Sunday.

After he left, I felt incomplete. I felt that my trust had been taken advantage of yet again. I felt lost, distorted, shaken. I felt miserable.

The trust that took me so long to give was gone. It took me a while to trust someone again, but I have. I’ve learned a lot from this experience, and it has helped me grow into a stronger person as a result.

Needless to say, this was the last boy I gave ANY parts of me to, and the last one I ever will.
FAMILY, FRIENDS, ACQUAINTANCES, AND BOYFRIENDS

MOVING ON
Dominique Townsend, SAC staff member

It rang four times before she decided to answer the phone.

“Mah, I’m ready to go home.”

“Don’t you like Texas, Dominique?” my momma asked.

“Hell No! This is nothing like New Orleans. I have no friends, no one to talk to. And I’m constantly feuding with everyone. I’m in a house where I’m alone most of the time, and I want to go back to McMain.”

“If you were to return to New Orleans, Dominique, you have no family down there. Where would you go? Who would you stay with?”

I took a few seconds to think about the questions. “My boyfriend.” I answered.

Silence.

Momma told me that the life I chose is not easy, and being 18 I would need some help. But being the stubborn, unreasonable, Dominique that I am, I didn’t listen or take heed to any of her advice.

I told her that I was on my own now and that her help wasn’t needed and everything I faced I could handle.

I never understood when older people said, “take your time; don’t rush; stay a child as long as you can.” Now it all makes sense.

You hear about young girls staying with their boyfriends. Well, since Hurricane Katrina, I am one of those girls. Living with my boyfriend and his family is not an easy job. J.O.B. That’s right. It’s work! My boyfriend’s dad is rarely home; most of the time he’s overseas playing his music. My boyfriend’s little sister, whom I love dearly, is one of my top priorities. But when my boyfriend’s in the streets lying and cheating, my job’s even harder.

It’s hard going to bed at night not knowing if, when, or what my boyfriend’s bringing home. He tells me that he’s grown up now and how he’s changed from a thug to a man now that he’s 20, but not knowing his whereabouts in his spare time is scary. I remember one night, just as I returned from the kitchen to get a drink of water, he
came strolling in. By the time he reached the bedroom, I was in bed pretending to be asleep. I glanced at the clock on the far end table, which read 4:42. He had just returned home after leaving at 6:30 the morning before. As he slipped into bed, he tapped me on my shoulder. Although I had funny feelings about where he was and whom he was with, I turned over and gave him what he asked for. I felt violated and misused just thinking of who and what he had just finished doing.

Many nights I stay up crying, wondering why he treats me this way. All I want is for him to be there for me and to make me feel happy.

It’s my senior year, and for the most part it’s been partially destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. The talk of going out with friends, partying, or even just relaxing is not even an option. My actions and outlook on everything has changed. Many of my friends and I no longer have anything in common. Most of my hobbies and responsibilities are far beyond those of which they encounter. Prom and Graduation are coming up, but yet I have other adult responsibilities I have to take care of, such as working, cooking, cleaning, and making sure all our financial and personal needs get taken care of.

At 18, I’m still learning about myself and what I really need and want in life. Being that I’m the only adult female figure in the house, because of the death of my boyfriend’s mom in the aftermath of Katrina, shackles grasp my ankles and many burdens rest on my shoulders. In my role as momma and wifey, it is tough following behind a great woman.

My boyfriend’s sister has many questions about things I sometimes don’t have the answers for. Now that she’s 16 there are many things that she needs to know, like the tricks and trades of a relationship, her body, the way males can have you to lose total control, the pros and cons of sex, and the respect she should demand from all males. At times I explain to her how love has crippled me from all personal morals in my relationship. I tell her how I feel, how and why I react in the way I do.

Being momma makes me feel wanted and needed. I value times we talk and just hang out, maybe because the talks with my older sister or my mother weren’t as enlightening. I see the hardships of being a “grown woman” portrayed throughout my everyday life.

At times my boyfriend can be the sweetest man who ever walked the earth, and other times he can be a pain in the ass. I remember one afternoon walking through the mall, his sister, he and I. I saw one of my male friends from school. I spoke and smiled, and my boyfriend
bitched and performed. Returning home, the show continued as another male friend of mine called my phone. We argued for at least an hour, and then with one apology and a gentle kiss, we were momentarily relieved. As he alleviated my body and mind from all tension and anger, we lay beside each other. I guess you can say I’m foolish. Maybe I am. It’s sad what love will make you do.

Sometimes I wish I could just go back to momma, but Post-Katrina, it’s not that easy. My mom just returned to the area, but the thought of me going back home is a thought of failure. Maybe I can’t leave because I don’t want to let him or the rest of the family down or make it seem like I can’t handle it, or maybe it’s because my pride won’t let me admit that I am too young and that I need someone else’s help. Every time I get the courage to leave he convinces me that he’ll do better. I guess you can say I’m foolish, maybe I am. It’s sad what love will make you do.

“Hey baby, how you doin’?”

“I’m fine.”

“How’s everything? You sound a little stressed and disappointed.”

“I hate to admit it, momma, but I don’t think I’m fit to be on my own. I love my boyfriend, but I don’t think this can last forever. Now it’s time for me to move on with my life. Mah, I’m ready to come home!”

“Are you sure, Dominique?”

“Now that your back home in New Orleans, I want to stay with you!”

Silence...

And then we laughed together.
ME TIME
Jade Fleury, McMains Secondary School

Finally, I can get time to myself!!! For weeks all I’ve wanted to do is lie in my bed, which has now become your bed, and relax. I’m sitting in my bed just writing away while Heather Headley’s “Me Time” drowns my ears. I have so much to say, but I don’t know how to say it without hurting anyone. It’s almost been two months since you packed up everything you had from Piety St. and drug it up the stairs to my mother’s closet. Never in my wildest dreams did I think my boyfriend would come to live with me.

There are so many things I feel as though I’m restricted from doing these days. Something as small as coming out of my, well “our,” bathroom with a towel on, I can’t do. Talking to my girls about our problems, I can’t do. The different boys I used to talk to…please, that’s not even a thought. No matter where I go, I never have privacy. And the tension between the family is tearing me apart. I love you, my mother and my sister to death. So when you guys argue, I feel as though I have to choose, and I hate that feeling. You’re used to living with just Glenn. And the three of us, well yeah it’s just been the three of us.

So I understand living with different people can be hard. I have no idea how long you are going to be here for, but no matter how long I’m willing to deal with the differences. As we go on we will learn that differences aren’t the only thing we will encounter. The differences we are faced with should be the least of our worries, and no matter what I know we will get through it.
WHY DO I PUT UP WITH HIM?  
LaShanta Williams, Warren Easton High School

If I didn’t love you,  
Would I call you every day?  
If I didn’t care about you,  
Would I say I love you?  
Listen to the things you accuse me of  
And tell me they don’t sound crazy.  
If I didn’t want you,  
I wouldn’t call you baby.  
I hate when you blame stuff on me  
That isn’t my fault.  
If I was doing something,  
I would have been gotten caught.  
I hate when we fuss and fight.  
Cause I love you so much.  
It’s bad enough that I can’t feel your touch.  
Frustration and temptation is what I feel for you.  
What I’m trying to say is I love you too.  
But I can’t be a dumb fool.  
WE ARE THROUGH!!!
A turning point in my life would have to be in October when I cried in my writing class after reading my essay on my uncle. At that precise moment, I finally came to grips with my feelings. I never spoke aloud about how I felt before. In fact, no one in my family even knows I wrote about my uncle’s unjust incarceration. After reading my piece, it was as if a load had been lifted off my shoulders. I had this immense amount of anger built up inside that was just itching to come out.

No one in my family ever talks about how they feel about my uncle being locked up. I remember when we were riding to visit him. No one talked about how sad it is to see him in those clothes. Even though we all would have that awkward feeling of not knowing what to say, we just didn’t say anything. No one talks about how angry they are that he is in there. When we have family gatherings, no one acknowledges the empty seat. We just pretend everything is alright. It’s unfair, but it’s life.

My uncle’s incarceration is a very sensitive issue. So all I’m able to do is keep my true feelings bottled up deep down inside. But once I wrote the piece, I just felt better. I felt even better after reading it aloud. It was as if the words I’ve been wanting to say all my life finally came out.

I never thought I’d cry at school; but those tears symbolized all the words no one will dare to utter at family gatherings. They symbolized all the words I want to write in letters instead of just “I hope you’re doing okay.” Each tear symbolized all the years since I was three that I didn’t get to know my uncle. They symbolized all the children he never had. They symbolized all the tears shed by family members when they are alone. They symbolized all the prayers of brighter days that seem to grow dimmer. They symbolized all the thoughts of “what if.” They symbolized more than words can ever say. Most of all, those tears symbolized all of our lives that are forever changed.

It’s too bad I could never say any of this to my family. I guess that’s why I write. But sometimes I wish I could say these things to them. But what would it accomplish? My uncle would still be in jail. My grandmother
would still be bitter about his unfair treatment. And we would still avoid talking about difficult subjects as a family.

I’m glad I wrote that piece. And I’m glad I cried. Because at that moment I was able to say something to strangers that I would never say to the people I love. I was able to shed tears that would never fall in front of family. I was able to think thoughts that would never be shared. This was a true turning point in my life; but it’s one my family will never know about.
In this day and time we should have someone to honor. Whether he or she is from the past or the present, we all need a good role model. We need someone to support us down the right path and someone to make us proud of ourselves. I am going to tell you a story about “My Modern Day Hero”—well, the person I would like to honor. His name is Officer Lloyd Van Clark Sr.

As we read the newspaper or watch the news, we learn of more and more humiliation in our Law Enforcement Departments. These reports lead society to believe that Law Enforcement Officers are corrupted. Because of the humiliation in this system, it makes it hard for a virtuous officer to verify that there are some good policemen on these forces.

Officer Lloyd Clark Sr. is the overbearing son of Dan Clark Jr., and the late Bessie Mae Clark. Lloyd was born on May 8, 1953, in New Orleans. He is one of twelve children. He is the product of Orleans Public Schools. He graduated from Warren Easton Senior High School in 1972. While at Easton, he was a member of the Marching Band.

Lloyd has a wife, six children, and several grandchildren. After graduating from high school Lloyd joined the work force. Lloyd always took jobs related to the law. One of his first jobs was as a security officer. He worked as a plainclothesman and as a security officer in several department stores throughout the city. He left these jobs and went to work for Weisner Security Company until he decided to pursue his own dream and become a member of the New Orleans Police Department.

In 1977, Lloyd began his training and became a New Orleans Police Officer. He worked in many areas seeking his true vocation. He was trained in such areas as the Urban Squad, Narcotics Division, Drug and Enforcement Agency Division. As the years passed, Lloyd received many outstanding awards, commendations and promotions for his job performance.

In 1992, he was injured by gunfire six times when he answered a domestic call. Although he was wounded, he aided another officer who was caught in the salvo cannonade. His heroic action led to his receiving the Medal of Valor. His is the highest honor given to any
officer who puts his life on the line trying to safeguard another person. He is called a “walking miracle” by his co-workers, because he was able to overcome his disadvantages.

From 1993 up to the present, Lloyd has received many outstanding awards for his job performance. In 1993, he was honored with the Purple Heart. In 1994, he was awarded as the “Lawman of the Year and the NAPO’S “Top Cop.” He also received a Commendation from the President of the United States. During November and December of 1995, he received the Veteran of Foreign Wars, Outstanding Law Enforcement Officer award, the Chief Henry Morris Memorial from the VFW, and the J.Edgar Hoover Award from the Post 8973 Veterans. In 1996, Lloyd was an honorary runner in the Olympics. He carried the Torch in the run-a-thon across the United States. Just last year he won the Teddy Roosevelt Award.

Lloyd recuperated from his injuries and returned to work. He was given a desk job; he refused. He preferred to go back on the streets. Three years after his return to active duty, he decided to work with the youth of our great city. He took extra college courses so he could perform at his best. Officer Clark is now working with the Police Athletic League, known as PALS. PALS helps to keep the youth off the streets and out of trouble. The unit has taught kids how to play sports and develop other skills.

Officer Clark is always advising others to follow their dreams and get a good education. I have two reasons for selecting Officer Clark as the person I would like to honor: first, because of his exceptional achievement on the job and his excitement for doing the right thing. Last but not least, Officer Lloyd V. Clark is my uncle.
LETTER TO SAM CHEW
Jim Randels, teacher and SAC staff

I guess you don’t know I’ve written about you before. We’ve visited and talked on the phone two or three times since that semester I worked in the dishwashing room of the cafeteria with you and then the next two and a half years when I’d join you for at least one break a day. But those two or three post-college visits are now 20 years away.

And yet I still write about you, tell stories about you.

I expect you don’t do the same. After all, back then I was in college, figuring out myself, Louisiana, the world. You’d already seen your best army buddy in Korea shot in the head, wiped his spattered blood from your face, lit a cigarette to calm your nerves—saying to hell with the sergeant’s command not to light anything that might draw attention to the foxhole. You’d already put one daughter through college and were financing the other two through Northwestern State on a small army pension and a smaller dishwasher’s salary. You talked about your wife. I know you were married, together. She must have worked too.

But I remember, and I tell stories.

Thank you for noting that I knew how to talk to you, for marking early on for me how different we New Orleanians were from rest of the state, for encouraging me in that difference, for valuing it.
“It is what it is,” a phrase used often by the present generation, tells us of the significance of change and reality. But what if it isn’t what we want it to be? Do we accept it for what it is and move on? Or do we try and change it to the idea of what we want it to be? Of course it’s in our nature to endorse what we want. But what if we still don’t get it? Well, it is what it is.

The headline read in the Times Picayune “THE WAR IS OVER!” This filled my heart, mind and soul with so much excitement that our country was finally at peace. But even more so was that when my life-long friend would come home from war this time. He would be home for good. He would be safe, at least safer than he was before. He would be able to start living life again, pursuing his dream of becoming an orthodontist. And most of all things would go back to normal.

You see Zavier and I have been friends since the beginning of time. He and my cousin who lived with me were best friends, so he was always around. He was there for the good, like fun times rolling down the street in the garbage can, and bad, like when I got out of that same garbage can with bruises and a gash, and he threw me over his shoulder and carried me in the house. Or when my great grandparents or guardians were sick and in the hospital, my cousins and I all moved in with Zavier and his mother. There was nothing that we wouldn’t do for each other.

The day of my cousin and Zavier’s graduation was a monumental day for us all. As all of both families extended congratulations to the well-educated young men, they received it with poise and grace.

“I can’t explain how much you all mean to me,” Zavier said. “You all have been there for me throughout x-y-z!” We laughed. “But nah, you guys have really contributed to the young men we are and the men we’re growing to be. And I still want to be an orthodontist a little bit, but something inside me is showing me, telling me, making me feel like I have to do more with my life than fix teeth,” he smiled. “So, uh, I joined the few, the proud, The Marines.”

My jaw dropped in amazement, I didn’t know if I was sadder than I was proud. This was even breath-taking news for my cousin, as I watched his
smile drastically fade. His mother’s eyes filled with tears as I watched my
great grandfather extend his hand in congratulations, himself being a
retired Marine. The rather indifferent aura was equally felt at the table.
No one knew what to say, so I figured I would be the first.

“Alright, we’re excited cause he going to the Marines! The few, the proud,
whatever, the hungry, can we eat? I mean it’s only a few of us. What’s
going on?”

He looked at me, smiled, gave me a wink, and mouthed “Thank you”
across the table while the rest of the group chuckled at my smart
remarks and made some of their own. I was joking on the outside, but on
the inside I couldn’t have been more shocked, hurt, and scared. A part of
me was leaving, but if he can be strong so can I, is what I told myself as I
enjoyed the rest of dinner.

I wish I would have had that same strength at dinner the day he went
away. The tears kept falling like a waterfall. Neither I nor his mother
could stop the tears. In a sense he was like a rock for me, for us both, my
cousin and me. So without him there to hold us down, only God knew
where the wind would take us. During the first month of him being
gone, I was content with letters, pictures, and memories. The thought
of him was rather pleasing, but as the months passed by and the letters
started coming further apart, it started becoming hard for me to look at
his pictures, read his letters, think of his smile. I could see and feel him
changing throughout the letters, and as he changed my emotions did
as well. The code he spoke in because he could only say so little made
me feel like he was more of an acquaintance, a friendly stranger. I knew
exactly who he was, but I didn’t know anything about him, at least not
any more. I realized that I had some growing to do, to get used to the new
Zavier. And it took some time, but I did. I mean whoever he would grow to
be I would accept him for who he was, because I cared for him too much.

The longest three months of my life had to be when Katrina hit, and we
lost contact. We didn’t know where he was, and he didn’t know where
we were, so we couldn’t write. The question even arose if he was even
still alive. I remember my grandfather saying that while he was at the
convention center he asked one of the military officers if he knew Zavier,
and if he was out here, or if he was okay, or if there were any Marines out
there who could answer his question. His mother, was a nervous wreck,
she contacted the Marines and many government sources but never
received a response. Not a day went by that she did not shed at least one
tear while completing an everyday activity because the thought of her
son crossed her mind. Then in late November the letter came. We were finally back home, and my mother went to the post office to change our address and came home with a bag full of letters. As I read them all one shot me in the chest.

“So, just one more year until we see each other again. I know I did say we get a month’s leave after one year, but I was one of the people selected to stay behind because there were too many people leaving that month. Then my sergeant told me that if I did another year straight, I’d be first up to get a higher rank, along with his recommendation. I mean you have to look at it like this, it’s an honor for my sergeant to be recommending me. I have to do this.”

I felt both sympathy and rage. He didn’t have to do anything, but he wanted it so dearly. Who was I or anyone else to knock him off cloud nine? Who gave him the idea that he would survive another year or the next day? But he believed it so deeply, that I did too. And another year of writing and reminiscing would come to pass. Then the glorious month of April ’07 arrived. Zavier’s mother, my cousins, his cousins, and grandparents were all filled with so much excitement and readiness that the car could burst open as we rode to the base. I remember when I read in the newspaper the war was over. I was ready to have my friend back; I was ready to have my old life back.

Once on the base, our family fought through the crowd of other families looking for their loved ones. The longer it took to find him as the seconds went past, the harder we began to fight. As we watched other families find their loved ones our fight became even stronger. Then my cousin let out a loud “LORD LOOK AT MY SON!” We all turned our heads, and there he was, Zavier Antoine Martin in the flesh. His mother, the first one to lay hands on him, couldn’t let him go. She was screaming so loud she was destined to blow someone’s ear drum. As he continued to hug other people and dapped off Marine buddies, his mother was attached to his right side. Finally he noticed me. He looked completely different from the last time I saw him. Now standing 6 ft. in the air, his frame more built, poised, and his aura now being that of a man who had been through something. Our hug was so warm that if you were standing close enough, you would feel our friendship and how much we cared for each other.

I was on one side, his mother on the other, and his other loved ones surrounding him. We walked to the car. Once in, the life-changing conversation began.

“Home for good, FINALLY!”
“I wish,” he released in a slightly low tone.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “The newspaper said it was over.”

“Well yeah Dev, in a sense kinda the war is over, but my job is far from being done.”

Silence.

“Puzzling, I know but…”

As he explained the situation to me my mind wondered off. The only thing I understood was he wasn’t staying. I didn’t care about what was blown up by whom, or who was making what with what, or who was the head of anything. I just didn’t get why the problem had to be solved like this. Why did he even have to care. As I joined the conversation again, I had to pick up all the information I missed.

“Okay so, slowly, start from the beginning, and lessen the Marine and government terminology.”

“Okay so basically the fighting part of the war is over, and what all the service men have to do now is stay over there to help them rebuild what we messed up. And that includes everything, like their government system, buildings, villages, and all. Which will be extremely hard if we have literally everyone shooting at us, blowing stuff up, and pitching rocks at us. Hell, it’s going to be more work fighting for our lives, trying to rebuild theirs.”

“So the war’s really not over, well at least against you guys it’s not?” I questioned.

“Yeah, you could say that,” he replied.

My thoughts were racing. That’s so stupid! That makes no sense! The whole war thing serves no purpose! We should have never blown it up in the first place! Unexpectedly my thoughts shot out of my mouth.

“Now what type of sense is that?! That’s just, uuuuuuuuuuhhh! So dumb! And there’s really nothing any single American can do about it? To stop it, to make it change?” I questioned.

“I mean, I wish there was Dev, but it is what it is.”

And then for me, reality set in.
HIGH SCHOOL DROP OUTS
DeVry Smothers, McMain Secondary School

I have five people in my family who dropped out of high school. My uncle dropped out of high school even after my dad promised him a brand new car, if he graduated. My uncle told me the only reason he went to school was because his mom wouldn’t let him stay home and to impress girls with his flamboyant style. Honestly, I think he was pulling my arm when he told me this.

My cousin, whom I am very close with, told me she dropped out of school because school was boring, girls messed with her, and she hated the material that the teachers gave her. She considered it nothing but busy work. Her brother also dropped out, because he found there was a lot of money in selling drugs. Did my cousin drop out because her older brother did? That’s what I wondered after I learned about her brother dropping out, but she stuck with her original answer.

My aunt and cousin both got into drugs heavily, but I think my aunt brought her nephew down with her. Even though his mother put him out, his aunt should have set a better example for her nephew. College recruiters were knocking down my aunt’s door and blowing up her phone, because my cousin excelled in football. But still he chose the drugs. Maybe they gave him a better rush than the football field or the classroom. A few years ago he was shot and killed. At the crime scene he was in possession of heroin.

Was it the drugs, my aunt, or these messed up school systems that did this to my family? My aunt is still alive. She doesn’t do drugs. Well, only the prescribed ones. She is on dialysis. She smokes cigarettes all day long. She told me that getting high was better than math class.

Are the school systems failing us or are we failing ourselves? I think it’s a two-way street, because we as a people can’t keep an interest in school and they as a school system can’t boost our interest. I am a senior at McMain now. Who would have thought that I could become a graduating McMain Mustang? Teachers and family members thought I wouldn’t amount to shit. The only thing that kept me in school was determination and my loving and supporting family—also the fact
that people told me I wouldn’t ever touch a diploma, let alone earn one on my own.

An independent study by the University of Idaho states that 39% of African Americans, both male and female, will drop out of school between eighth and tenth grade. This should send a message to school systems and families that we need to step up and help each other.
WHAT’S GOOD LIVING IN MY HOOD
Kenneth Sip, Frederick Douglass High School

Ah man, my neighborhood was very fun, watching myself grow up with all my friends. While I was growing, there was nothing but trouble with my friends and me. Every day we were always doing stupid things like breaking people’s house window glass and car glass with rocks and broom sticks at the age 9 and 10. You know kids are going to be kids. When you’re a kid, you don’t know what you be doing. Everything you think of is going to be stupid, but at the same time you think it’s going to be fun. You grow out of it.

One day we broke this lady’s glass: Mrs. Dianne the Candy Lady. That’s when we got into trouble. We ran into these two men. They worked for housing. They had their Housing Authority of New Orleans uniforms on. They stopped us and said, “We are two good Coaches from two good colleges.” Coach Chinese was from Louisiana Tech and Coach Ski from Southern University. That’s when they said, “We are going to keep y’all little asses out of trouble.”

The Coaches were talking about getting a team together, and we all were happy. They told all of us to meet at practice the next day for 4:00 p.m. across the street from the project, and the coaches told us everything was free. And for every time we do something stupid we would have to do 50 push ups and Front Flip the whole field. I really wasn’t expecting that to happen: two grown men to help us bad ass kids to stay out of trouble.

I really appreciate that they took some of their time to help us. My Momma really appreciated them a lot by buying both of my Coaches beers and something to eat. Without my Coaches coming, me and all my friends would really be in a lot of trouble like stealing, cursing older people out, no respect. When my coaches came they changed everything in the project. A lot of people started to support us a lot. What I mean is every game we had the whole project coming watch us play football. That’s what affected my project. The crack heads and the drunk people were taking us seriously.
That’s what touched me, because my people had something to do other than being drunk or being on drugs. Come to think about it, the coaches just didn’t help us, they helped everybody in the project. That’s why I want to go to NFL to make money and give back to honor those who helped me with my problems. I really thank both coaches for helping me.
When I was young, I frequently went to the beach every evening to have fun with my friends or my family. In Vietnam, the beach was just a block away from my house; therefore, it was common place for me to spend the evening walking or swimming. I remember observing men netting fish on the beach. They pulled out large amounts of fish in just a short time. I also followed my dad around to catch crabs crawling in bunches around the beach. That was back then. When I was twelve, things changed dramatically. Sea creatures such as crabs and fish were diminishing in great number. I could hardly find a crab crawling across the beach or a fish that suddenly popped up from under water. Five years after coming to the United States, I began to realize the reason why those sea creatures are greatly reduced in population. I had been watching a lot of shows about nature, and thus, I identified the main cause of the shift in sea resource. It was due to over fishing that those resources were severely reduced. I thought that it would be hopeless to find a solution for the problem; however, after reading the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize speech by Wangari Muta Maathai, I believe that there is a solution to re-enrich the sea natural resource that my birth place once possessed.

Sea resources were what hundreds of men and women in my town of birth depended on to live. It was their main income for a whole year. Because of that, every one of them wanted to net as many fish as possible. This act drained the fish out, because fish could not reproduce so fast to restore its population while the netting and fishing went on regularly. The fish population reduced rapidly each year as the town population increased. The seamen struggled to keep up with their lives while the fuel price rose so high that its cost surpassed the money the seamen made over each fishing trip. Yet, fishing is the job that has been deep-rooted inside every seaman, and thus, they take any risks to look for the fish over the vast ocean. They traveled farther from the land to the deep water of the South China Sea, hoping to find a huge school of fish. The trip often took a whole month, yet its result sometimes is not as good as the seamen have anticipated.
Overhearing a telephone call between my mom and my relative in Vietnam, I discovered that the fish season is worse this year in town. Again, the seamen are struggling to earn a decent income for this year. Sympathizing with what I heard, I began to think about the fate of a neighboring friend in Vietnam. He quit school after fifth grade, because his family could not afford to pay for his education. At the age of nine, he was already out there with his dad and his brothers, pulling up the captives that were stuck inside the net. I remember my time seeing he and his mother removing the fish and the crabs from the net while his father, who was soaking wet and smelled like fish all over, prepared a big, shallow bottom basket to put the little creatures in. Those fish and crabs would then be sold at a nearby flea market, earning his family enough money to have a decent dinner. His family life was subsistent and dependent on the sea creatures that were caught. At my age, he already was a professional fisherman. He talked like a fisherman, acted like a fisherman, and lived like a fisherman. He never felt unhappy about his life situation, but I thought of him as being provincial. My mom told me that he is currently somewhere in Phu Quoc, an island in South Vietnam, fishing along with some other sailors. His family has long been fishermen, and inevitably, he is one now.

Thinking about my friend makes me wonder what should be done to improve the lives of many young people like him, and I have realized the solution: education. This idea came to me when I read the speech of Maathai, in which she emphasizes the primary need for education. Her “citizen education program” is what struck me the most. The program itself is a mutual organization of native people to “identify the problems, the causes and possible solutions.” Through her program, people begin to make connections between “their own personal actions and the problems they witness in the environment and in society.”

They are exposed to many human activities that are devastating to the environment and societies. The participants discover that they must be part of the solutions. They realize their hidden potential and are empowered to overcome inertia and take action. They come to recognize that they are the primary custodians and beneficiaries of the environment that sustains them.

The result of this program is so fantastic that I am speechless about it. “Thousands of ordinary citizens were mobilized and empowered to take action and effect change. Trees of peace were planted in many parts of the country to promote a culture of peace.”
I hope that the same program will be carried out for the people of my home town in Vietnam, especially for that friend of mine. Fishermen are not interested in the subject of engineering or science, yet they are interested in how to harvest fish in large quantities. Therefore, it would be beneficial to teach them to reserve the sea resources. They need to see the negative effects of overfishing on their lives. They must be led to come up with their own solutions to protect that resource. In addition to that, new methods of fish farming should be taught to the fishermen so that they can harvest plenty of fish while conserving many fish species. Finally, they need to be empowered to take action. This can be done with financial support, because fishermen will need a huge capital to carry out the fish farming plan or any new methods for both conserving and harvesting the sea resources.

Talk is always easier than practice. My idea sounds good, yet it is difficult to do. Still, I hope that it will come true one day. The fishermen need the environmental education. They need to learn how to solve their fishing issue in an efficient way. They need new methods that can help them conserve their sources while they continue their traditional job. If it comes true, the fishing industry in my town will be saved. My friend will no longer need to go that far away for fish; he can just walk on the beach leisurely knowing that he has good income for the year and that he is able to conserve the resources that god has given to Vietnam.
A FRIEND OF MINE:  
(moving from external to internal focus)  
Shante Vigne, McDonogh 35 High School  

When I was in the ninth grade, I started to get to know this senior who attended my school. At first I was just focused on the external part of him. He was cute, chilled, and a nice person to be around. I was sitting in my seventh period class, here at McDonogh 35, when William Richburg came in. He sat behind the teacher’s desk and asked me, “Do you want some candy?” I thought it was nice because he was a senior and I was a freshman. I said yes and took the candy, Starburst I think. Ever since that day in class, whenever he saw me in the hallway, he spoke to me. He used to say, “Hey cutie,” and he told me I’m pretty and I have a nice personality. I thought that was sweet. He didn’t walk in the hall and treat me like dirt just because I was a freshman. He treated me as if I was a person he knew his whole life. William has twists in his hair. He has pretty eyes that are dark brown and small. He has a beautiful smile and nice teeth to go along with his smile. I just think he’s cute.

As time passed I began to get to know the internal part of him. He was the sweetest person anyone could ever meet. As time kept passing he became my best friend, and he will always be. Whenever I was down, he was there to talk to me. Whenever I needed him, he was always there, no matter what.

From that day on I’ve only been focused on the internal part of him. He has never changed the way he is towards me. He has never stopped being sweet, kind, nice, and the person he has been. He helps me to see things I probably would never have realized. He will always be one whom I can count on no matter what happens. He’ll always be there.

I remember a time when my mom and I got into it because of a boy. I wanted to converse with this boy, but she didn’t want me to. She just didn’t think he was right for me. I was kind of mad at my mom. I wasn’t understanding why she was making it so hard. When I talked to Will, he told me that my mom wasn’t trying to make it hard, she was just
looking out for me. She just wanted the best for her child. She didn’t
want to see me hurt. He told me that she does that kind of stuff because
she loves me, not to make me mad. And I know that Will wouldn’t tell
me anything wrong.

He’s always worried about someone else’s feelings before his own, and
that’s one of the main things I like about him. He has a heart. He’ll do
whatever it takes for someone else to be happy, even if it means making
himself unhappy. There was a time when he didn’t want me to go to
this sleepover. The girl who was having the sleepover used to be my
friend. Then we stopped being friends and became “associates.” Will
just figured that since she was never my real friend, I shouldn’t be her
associate either, and I shouldn’t be going to her sleepover. But since I
was talking about it and I wanted to go, he told me to go, even though
he didn’t want me to. He told me to go and have fun.

Once before I thought I had no one, like everyone was just turning
against me, and I already knew no one liked me, so that made it even
worse. But in my time of need he was there to keep my head up and
tell me that if no one else is here for me, he is and will always be. I
needed a shoulder to cry on, and he was there for me. He’s a friend to
me and to whomever.

I’ve learned that you’re always supposed to get to know a person first.
Once I got to know Will and the internal feelings and that side of him,
we became real close. He’ll always be a friend of mine.
When I saw you, a wave of memories came back to me. These childhood memories were playing in my mind like a movie: pretending to sleep so Mrs. James, our kindergarten teacher, wouldn’t catch us talking and playing during naptime; playing tag on the blacktop during recess; sharing our snacks with each other if we ever had any; riding our bikes around the neighborhood; playing basketball when you always let me win; and many more. I knew you were thinking the same when you saw me too.

Two years feels like a lifetime when you stop talking to a close friend. If you ever meet this person again, you might feel the same way I did. You will feel a sudden delight while your mind races to remember this friend. It takes a little time for your mind to remember this entire person. In that split second you might feel a bit puzzled as to where your friend came from and where has he or she been. But you don’t ask him that right away. You get a sense of familiarity when you see this person, so ya’ll talk about the recent things that have been happening.

This happened to me in the ninth grade, when I saw my close friend again after two years. It was the first day of school. I was already happy to see all of my classmates and teachers. I was looking forward to seeing which classes I had and whom would I have them with. Walking in the hallway to my second period class, I was still packed with excitement. I entered the class and picked a seat. Without noticing, I chose a seat right behind my friend. He had his head down, so I couldn’t see his face yet. From the back, this person sure looked familiar, but I was too busy filling out my form 44’s to socialize. Then the teacher told the class to pass the forms up to the first person in each row. He turned half way around to reach for the form. At a glimpse I saw his face; it was my old friend! I tapped on his back, and we finally saw each other. We kept a smile on towards each other for about five seconds, not knowing what to say because both of us had over-flowing emotions that clogged our brains, preventing us from speaking. Still smiling he said, “I didn’t know you were in this class.” Still smiling myself I said, “I didn’t know you were going to this school.”
“Yea, I decided to come here for high school. What classes do you have?”

“Here let me get my schedule. Let me see your schedule too.”

“Okay hold—”

“Please turn around Mr. Nguyen” Mrs. Williams interrupted. We both laughed, because it had been the longest time ever since we got in trouble together. When the bell rang, we walked to our next class while talking with each other about meeting at lunch to hang out and such. Our conversation flowed easily. It seemed like he hadn’t been away for two years. Then at lunch I asked him where he had been and why did he come back. He told me the reasons and how everything was for the past two years for him, and I told him how everything was for me during the past two years.

When I was reading the novel Beloved by Toni Morrison, I noticed a scene that was very similar to my encounter with my friend. Beloved includes many types of relationships such as mother to daughter, daughter to mother, friend to friend, and person to ghost. The scene shows a friend to friend relationship of a woman—Sethe—and her old friend from the Sweet Home Plantation—Paul D. Sethe was running through a chamomile field on her way home. When she came home, sitting on the porch of her house was Paul D. It had been eighteen years since they saw each other, and their first conversation was a bit like my conversation with my friend:

She said, “Is that you?

“What’s left.” He stood up and smiled. “How you been girl, besides barefoot?”

When she laughed it same out loose and young. “Messed up my legs back yonder. Chamomile.”

Even though they hadn’t seen each other for awhile, they laughed, smiled, and talked like normal. Their past memories of each other formed a familiarity, and they were comfortable talking with each other. Memories can bring two people back together.

When my friend and I met each other again, it brought back many memories of our own. Although we didn’t talk about the past much, we both remembered the fun times we had together. I think that’s one of the reasons why we were so easily communicating. Our memories bonded us back together without having to actually be said; the memories only had to be kept in mind.
ZERO TOLERANCE FOR PHYSICAL MEN

Jaz’lin Armstrong, McDonogh 35 High School

It’s 12:45 a.m., and I haven’t the slightest clue of how to get started. If I don’t get something turned in to Mr. Randels tomorrow, it may never get done. My eyes are getting heavy, and this bed is not helping.

“Keep focused, Jaz. You can do this. Put some music on to keep you stimulated,” I tell myself. I can’t work lying in a plush bed with Carl Thomas playing on my eight-year-old stereo and a compressed ton of information sitting idle on my lap. I can’t believe my first draft was lost in the school’s main office. Because of that mishap, I’m sitting here three weeks later struggling with this paper, again.

I’m trying to recall what happened during the interview that took place over a month ago. I remember when I walked into our living room, I found the recess lights in our ceiling were at their peak. My mom had the big screen (that’s usually in the corner) pulled closer to her. She had the volume blasting to keep herself awake as she finished some last-minute paper work. Sound familiar? Like mother, like daughter.

With even heavier eyes than mine, she sat watching the Lifetime Channel. I think *Any Day Now* was on. It’s a sitcom dealing with interracial friendships. I just knew it would be like pulling teeth trying to get my mom to cooperate for this interview. I needed to get some information out of my overworked, sleepy, busy, T.V.-occupied mom. All I needed was a story.

“Domestic Violence!” I thought. After all, I did suggest that as a topic for our class to study. I gave it a shot, even though I was hesitant about the outcome of some of her reactions. With her being tired, there was no telling what she might blurt out. Or she might have turned me away before I could even begin the interview, because she was so tired. So I asked, and she answered.

I tried to start off real professional like. I knew that if I came with a serious attitude about the interview, she might cooperate more. I asked, “Ms. Armstrong, I was wondering if I could interview you on a rather
personal topic, domestic violence. I would like to give my classmates some insight from you on this issue.”

My mom looked at me and laughed. She was so tired, she disregarded every word I had said. My confidence went form one hundred to two percent just like that. I knew I had to try another approach. Begging is what won her over. I brought it to her attention that I needed something out of her or my grades would drop in my writing class. I also informed her that it would be her fault, because I needed her for the assignment.

Ms. Armstrong sat straight up in her seat, still hazy eyed, and said, “If it’s for school, you know I’m all for it.” I began the interview by asking if she knew anyone or had she personally been involved in an abusive relationship.

“Girl, yes indeed I know more than one person who was involved in an abusive relationship,” she answered, eager to talk about something other than what she was doing at the time.

“If I ask the right questions,” I thought, “I bet she would go on for hours.” But all I needed was something that I could build an essay on.

“Mommy, can you take me and my readers back to one of the most memorable experiences you have had dealing with domestic abuse?”

Looking at me like she was trying to figure something out through my eyes, she answered, “Sure, Jazzy, but I never experienced anything first-hand. Make sure to set that record straight. I can tell you `bout your grandmother, though.”

When my mom revealed that my grandmother, a woman I have known for seventeen years, had been a victim of domestic violence, I went into total shut down for a minute. My eyes wouldn’t blink. I could hear, but I couldn’t say anything. Never in a million of my wildest dreams would I have imagined my grandmother falling victim to such horrible treatment in the name of “love.”

“Yes, honey, your grandmother was a punching bag for my stepfather for a few years.”

Mom stopped and let me soak up that sentence, as well. She knew I was having a hard time believing what she was saying. She gave a look of concern that asked if I was going to be alright. Then she tried to move on.
“You ready? Okay. There was one time I can remember vividly. Doe was in her room with Leroy, my stepfather. They had gone out to a nightclub, and they were drunk. I hated when they went out, because they would come home and argue. Every time—it never failed. This time they were at each others’ throats.”

She demonstrated by forcefully putting her hands to her throat. She always demonstrated throughout her stories. She had started this when I was little, because I found it easier to understand if she acted out whatever she was telling me.

“I can’t remember what they were fighting about, but it went on to the wee hours of the morning. And this was before they got physical. I couldn’t sleep because of them, and I had to go to school the next morning.

“When I got out of bed at around 7:30 a.m., I was just in time for the grand finale of their fight. I walked into the hallway going towards the bathroom only to witness Leroy Green, the D.J., pick my mom up as if she were a feather. He moved with angry steps. Traveling toward the back door with her fighting him every step of the way, he didn’t break the rhythm of his stride. He opened the torn screen door and threatened to throw your grandmother down two flights of stairs.”

My mouth dropped to the floor while my mom told her story.

“Instead of rolling her down the stairs, he pivoted and placed her body over the railing of our balcony. Then he simply let her go. While my mom took a free fall to the cement walkway below, I blacked out and fainted in the hall. I woke up to the sounds of my mother fussing and hobbling up the stairs on two broken ankles.”

My mom spoke so freely. It just seemed so bizarre that my mom was talking to me about her mom. It was almost like she was a best friend of mine who was telling me about how her parents exchanged blows. It was not a mother-daughter thing at all. It was like a friend-type conversation we were having. It actually seemed at some points in her story like she wanted me to jump in and share some advice with her. And even though that was a major story that she could remember, she recalled some general background of her mom’s relationship with her stepfather.

“He used to beat up on my mom regularly. Any time he got angry with her, he would turn her ankles backwards. She has the scars to prove it to this day. He’d bend her ankles almost to the breaking point. Maybe it
was Doe’s suspicious, questioning disposition. Or maybe it was Leroy’s womanizing ways that fueled their constant bickering. I could never figure that out.

“Whatever it was, it put me in a depression for a long time. I rid myself of all my friends. I didn’t want anyone to know me. I was going to McDonogh 35, and it was my senior year. I didn’t even want to go to my own Class Night because of it. My mom’s eye was black. My biological father was God knows where, and I hated my stepfather. It was a horrible time for me. But my mom put on some shades to hide her blackened eye and made me go. And then after a while, I got really tired of their arguments always resulting in a blackened eye, broken ankle, or bruised face for my mom.”

When my mom started talking about her depression and not participating in her senior class activities, I began to hate Leroy Green, the man who did this to my grandmother. This is a man I have never met in my life. But I didn’t have to know him to know that he hurt my mother more than he’ll ever understand. I felt sorry for my mom. She was in the prime of her senior year, and she couldn’t even enjoy it.

She went on to say, “I got to the point where I was looking for ways to prevent their fights or even stop them altogether. In the beginning, I would run down the two flights of stairs to my grandparents’ apartment. I would tell Poppa, your great-grandfather, that Leroy was fighting my mom. Poppa would grab his pistol and run to his daughter’s rescue. After a while though, Leroy started catching on to what I was doing. Then if he saw me trying to go downstairs to Poppa, he would lock me up in my room so that I couldn’t get out.

“In my room, I started thinking about killing Leroy. That would get my mom away from her dangerous love. After a while though, Doe kind of wised up on her own. She might have finally gotten tired of being pushed around. Whatever it was, she divorced him; but I could never divorce the scars their fighting had left behind.”

My mom had one single tear falling down her cheek as she said those words. And the tear seemed as if it were feeling the pain she was going through, that my grandmother went through, that I was going through as I watched my mom break down.

Now, crying hard tears we both sat in our living room. 12:00 a.m. Holding hands, we watched each other cry. Seeing how hurt my mom was broke my heart. Her stepfather’s ways had confined her growth
as a person for three long, wasted years. But she had to give my grandmother’s marriage to Leroy some credit.

“My mother’s marriage made me a very independent woman. I can’t believe what she went through, all for Love’s sake.”

Then my mom’s eyes got really serious. She wiped her eyes and strengthened her voice. And with desperate, searching eyes she said,

“I have ZERO TOLERANCE for physical men… NEVER… EVER… NEVER stay in a relationship with a physical man. Protect your kids, and GET OUT!”

We were bawling by this point. I knew my mom was begging me to really consider what she was saying. I knew she wanted me to take her advice and keep it with me through life. And she had to know that I was absorbing everything she was saying. We made a connection during this interview that was not deliberate, nor was it very direct. However, there was a bonding going on between my mother and me. It broke down the parent-child barrier that stopped us from understanding each other as people.

She went on to give more vital advice, but the most powerful piece of advice she gave stayed with me while I wrote my paper. It was her closing statement to her interview.

“If a man shows signs or symptoms of violent tendencies once, he will definitely do it again. And there are some women who validate themselves with the men in their lives. These women will actually take, disregard, or even cover up the dangers and beatings these men put them through. Don’t be one of these women. Think about it.”
1535 Mandeville Street, my home before home. I sat outside in the car waiting on my mama to come out that bright yellow and cement grey memory book I used to call home. She was taking too long to get her rent money from the tenet who now lived there. I was hot and sweating with the air on, so I got out. I climbed the stairs and rang the doorbell. The door opened, still creaking as I remembered. The tenet and I smiled and spoke. I walked in slowly almost scared to reopen this book I had locked and kept closed for eleven years. The lady left me to find my own way through the shotgun house to the kitchen.

I stood at the front door staring at the fire place for a while. My heart became heavy. Moments later I decided to start this journey through my memory book to the kitchen. Moving past the couch I saw the tents my dad, cousins and I made with books, sheets, and chairs. I saw the pews we made with milk crates, garbage bag choir robes, and bibles out of construction paper.

I crossed the tall sliding door sill into my mom and dad’s room. I remember the family meetings on the tall king-sized bed. The movie nights with me and my daddy. Standing in the mirror pretending to watch my daddy comb my hair.

I moved through the hallway past the closet stopping at the bathroom. I imagined my baby days with bubbles and my nuk. FCUK stained the side of the tub in red permanent marker. The beating that my cousins and I got because nobody ratted, even though we knew who did it. Before I entered the next room I hesitated.

It happened again. My heart was heavy, but this time tears followed. Struggling to hold back my tear-filled eyes, I walked in my room.

The memories played in my head like a flip book. Every page turned, playing out in perfect sequence, until I got to a page that wouldn’t turn. My tears flowed uncontrollably. Watching this day play out over in my head hurt the most. I tried for so long to suppress this particular memory, only to realize that I had not succeeded.
Asleep in my bed he got on top of me. I woke up scared out of my mind. It was dark, but the street light lined my favorite cousin’s face through the blinds. He told me that he wouldn’t hurt me, but he lied. He touched me in all the wrong places, some places that I was scared to touch myself. I cried and prayed that he would stop, but it only got worse. He entered my body and took all the innocence I had left. I tried to fight him off, but it didn’t work, so I lay until he finished.

The flip book page fluttered but still remained unturned. I slid down the wall crying uncontrollably. Of all the memories I had there, why was this one still so clear like it happened just yesterday? Maybe the page hadn’t turned because I hadn’t dealt or talked about this since it happened. I don’t remember leaving that day. Before today this would not have been in my book to remember. But thanks to God, 1535 Mandeville St. is no longer the end of my book but yet a chapter in my new book to remember.
MY HISTORY

Thomas Williams III, McMain Secondary School

March 22, 1989, in Charity Hospital, around 5:18 a.m., I came out my mother’s womb. 9 lbs and 6.5 oz was my weight, and Timothy Albert was my name.

But I wasn’t your ordinary baby. By me being so big, the doctors removed me from my mom and broke the bone in my left arm. The damage was called a pinched nerve. This means that a body part, which was my arm, will have little ability to react to anything. In my case, my left arm is shorter than my right. It’s also smaller and weaker. The bone itself is small, and I have no triceps muscle. Also my arm can only remain at a 90 degree angle and lower. My biceps muscle is the size of a baby turtle. My left shoulder blade is out of shape, and my left collar bone overlaps itself. My tendons don’t have the strength to move my fingers, and my wrist just wobbles all over.

This condition must be pretty funny to some people, because they used to tease me until I started fighting. With the blessing of God, my right hand and arm can overpower plenty of people.

When I entered the fifth grade, I witnessed my first surgery. The operation was meant to open my forearm, take my last veins that were in my fingers, and tie them to my index and middle fingers. Yea, I was scared and nervous, but my expression was happy and cheerful. After six months the cast was removed, and my arm was smaller. I saw the long scar. I pretty much was speechless.

Years went on, but the scare didn’t. I started weightlifting to gain strength. But we’re talking about me, so you know I was only lifting with one arm.

Today I still weight lift but with both arms. However, I still have to help my left arm with my right. The scar still remains, but my strength has increased. My muscle in my left arm remains small, but I live life to the fullest.

But do realize that in fourth grade I got my name changed after my father, Thomas Williams, Jr., which makes me the third. And if you’ve
read my other essays, you know I will improve upon the previous generations and be the first male in my family to graduate from high school. So I’m lifting all sorts of weights.
“Jade, I don’t know why you care so much anyway.”

“Umm could it be you’re my boyfriend and I care and I know you’re too smart to be going to a stupid school like John Mac?”

“Man look, all I’m trying to do is graduate. And you know we’re not going to be doing any work, so I might as well go to the Mac and make it easier on myself.”

“Whatever Keith, that’s all on you.”

Getting into minor arguments about where my ex-boyfriend, Keith, should go to school after Hurricane Katrina was not uncommon. He had his idea of what he thought would be best for him, and I had mine. These ideas were never the same. He’d often tell me why he should go to John Mac versus going to McMain. “Man look, if I go to McMain, I’m bound to get put out anyway. I don’t fool with nobody who goes there, and I’m not trying to do no work. So it’d just make more sense for me to go to the Mac.”

After hearing those similar words after every argument, I began to keep my mouth shut but not my ears. I would always hear him say how much fun he’d have at school, how all of his friends were going and that he couldn’t wait for school to start. But never did it seem to cross his mind that he’d get a better education if he went to McMain. Or maybe it did, but he was more concerned about having fun. Or could it have been that he never had intentions of going to college, so going to a school like McMain that would look good on applications to college didn’t matter. I often wondered why his mother didn’t push him to go to a better school. She, just like me, knew her son was capable of the work. But never did she step in to say, “Keith should go to a better school than John McDonogh.”

Besides, many people of my generation could care less what high school they attend. What are they to do? They don’t have adamant parents
pushing them to do better, and most of their peers feel the same as they do. Should we continue to go on and forget about other young people like Keith?

Being around my ex-boyfriend and other close friends, who also like Keith chose to go to the lower performing schools that are not based on “choice” and are now run by the state after Katrina, has made me realize that as long as the school system provides them with two very different atmospheres, there will always be segregation within New Orleans school system. Continuing to keep us apart is slowly destroying the gender relationships between us. For example, in my Creative Writing class at McMain we learned that out of the 7 females in the class, only 1 of them would consider dating a male from McMain. It’s obvious something is missing. Why is it we’d rather date a guy from John Mac or Sarah T. Reed? The separation is making many females like myself stray away from the males that we attend school with, slowly tearing apart our social networks and future families.

Who’s to say I can’t benefit from Keith? Perhaps he knows something I don’t, or vice versa. We should be able to collectively put our ideas together and help one another. Bringing us together will then show the system that it is very possible for both Keith and I to attend school together and learn. Who knows? Maybe the adamancy I posses about school will rub off on people like Keith and motivate them to do better. If this is so, why are we developing more and more separate schools and school systems and not more neighborhood schools that the whole diversity of young people in a neighborhood attend?

When will Keith and I learn together in the same school? What system of schools will make that choice possible?
As each year goes by it seems like things only get harder and harder for me. I can handle school; it’s not that difficult to me. Trying to work, go to school, and have fun on the weekends is what’s difficult.

Every school day I have to get up at 5:30 a.m. to catch the city bus, because I live in Kenner, Louisiana, and my school, Eleanor McMain, is in New Orleans. My mother and I live in Kenner now due to hurricane Katrina. Katrina forced a lot of people to move into surrounding cities of New Orleans, because their houses were damaged. We once lived in New Orleans East, but our house was flooded by the storm. My mom doesn’t plan to move back, because she says it isn’t much of a livable environment. She doesn’t have a car to travel around for groceries and to get to work. Since the storm the bus transportation is slower in some areas, and there are not as many buses running like there were before Katrina. In Kenner, where we reside now, it’s more like a suburb, and there is only one bus that goes one long route around the city. And even though there are two buses on the line at once, the buses still come an hour apart. If I miss one bus in the morning going to school, I am very late for school. Half the time when I do miss a bus, I just stay home, because by the time I get to school after missing a bus we would probably be in 3rd or 4th period. I have seven classes, so basically I would miss half of my classes.

We get out of school at 3:10. Most people get home near 4 p.m. I don’t get home until 5:30 p.m. or sometimes 6:30 p.m. due to traffic. By the time I get home I’m tired and worn out. I rest for a while and take a shower. Then I start my homework. If I have a lot of homework, I don’t stay up all night and do it. I go to sleep and hope the teacher will give me another night or I do it in another class. I know I should be going to my district school, which is Bonnabel, but since I knew not many schools in New Orleans were open, I knew I would probably have some friends at McMain rather than Bonnabel. I also wanted to go to McMain, because I was already used to Orleans Parish Public School System and didn’t want to struggle learning Jefferson Parish School System during my last year of high school. Since I made the choice to go to school miles away, I don’t get enough rest, and it affects my grades.
I work at Popeye’s every weekend. My schedule stays the same every week. I have to be to work for 9 a.m., and I get off when I’m finished cleaning after we’re closed, which is usually about 7 p.m. I usually get a ride home from one of my co-workers. If one of my managers gives me a ride home, I usually get home late, because I have to wait for them to finish their paper work. Working and coming home late interferes with my weekend homework and rest from school. I know if my job is interfering with school, then I shouldn’t be working, but I really have no choice, because if I don’t work, then I won’t have any money to go to school or buy food and clothes. Basically I have to provide for myself, because my mother is a single mom, and she has a hard time paying bills. She doesn’t ask me to pay any bills, because my brother is helping her pay some. My brother lives with us, because his house was damaged by Katrina. I used to receive child support from my father, who hasn’t been in my life since I was four, but the judge who was working on the cases with him and my mom hasn’t contacted him since he evacuated from the storm over 18 months ago. Most of the money I receive from my check every two weeks, I spend on bus fare. Before Katrina the New Orleans Public Schools gave bus tickets to the kids who lived in a different zip code from the school. After Katrina the buses were free until August 2006. I spend six dollars a day traveling back and forth to school. I’m glad I have a job, because if I didn’t I would probably be at Bonnabel by default, but at the same time my job puts an extra load on my back.

“Josh, what are you doing this weekend? You want to go out and chill or something?” That’s what my friends always ask me. All I can say is that I have to work, and maybe if I get home early enough, then we can try to go out. Well we always try, but things never work out. Most of my friends live in New Orleans, so most of the time our problem is transportation. Either I have a way to the event, but no ride home, or I have a ride home but no ride to get there. My friends always complain and say, “Man, you always have to work. Don’t you ever get tired?” I pay no attention to them, because they don’t know my struggle. I know since the storm we all have our own struggles, but we stress them in different ways. If you can beat the struggle, then you’re strong. If you can’t, you have to figure out a way to keep fighting, because only the strong survive.
THE LAST REDD LIGHT!

A eulogy of sorts for Douglass Redd,
December 1947 – July 2007

Kalamu ya Salaam, SAC teacher and staff member

1.
What would you do if you knew
You were going to die tomorrow, or maybe
Just had a vague feeling that the knocking
At the door was a death rattle, or maybe
You just ached real bad and instead of words,
Moans slobbered sideways out your mouth? What
Would you do if your hand wasn’t working and
You couldn’t control your bladder
And just had to lay in whatever…, you know
What I’m saying?...

Life sometimes asks us some tough unanswerable questions like
What would you do if you failed the ultimate survival test?

2.
His flesh was still soft.
I looked down on the calm of his face,
The peaceful repose was the… I can’t make it pretty,
I mean I could describe it with pretty words but
It would still be fucked up.

A man with whom I have spent most midnights
Over the last three hundred and some days,
I was in his presence even when he was too sick
To appreciate that I was there, now, his corpse
Was laying there, unmoving, untwisted, unhacked
By coughs and phlegm. He looked better
Than I’ve seen him for weeks. You know
It’s bad when a cadaver looks better
Than a fitfully breathing body.
3.

When you say someone you love is dead
What do you mean?

Outside the sun was shining, inside,
All inside of me the sky was crying. I was standing
At the last Redd light.
January 12, 2007, started out to be a wonderful day. I had just got back from a two-week vacation. I was very refreshed and felt great. I walked through the door feeling good, showing off my new brown shirt that only managers wear.

I had started as a regular crew person and worked my way up. I came in knowing what I wanted and where I wanted to go. So I did my best and worked hard to become a crew trainer. I was one of the best crew trainers the south had ever seen. That’s when I really showed my skills. I was put in charge of training at a store that was about to reopen. Later, I became manager. But soon, my managerial skills were challenged. Rush hour had quickly come along, and sparks started to fly. Then it started. I was in the office counting the safe when Jalisa came to call me. As I walked to the front I could hear the reason Jalisa, whom I had trained so well, came to me for help.

“Manager, Manager I want to see a manager!”

Two minutes later who walked up but me, a high school student walking tall with my fresh brown shirt. All she saw was a teenager not a manager, not some one in charge but a child. I responded, “Ma’am what’s the problem?”

“What’s not the problem; every time I come in here y’all get my order wrong.”

“Well ma’am, what can I do to fix this problem?” I asked.

“Where is Dan or Nicole?” she demanded, asking for other managers.

I told her that I was the only manager on duty at that time. At this point I asked the crew what happened, and she got highly upset but refused to tell me her problem. I started to question myself. Do I really have the authority that I thought I had? Do I really get the respect that I deserve? Do they see a manager or another crew member? Do I get the respect I worked hard for? I began to think about how comfortable I was doing my job and if I was doing the right thing, but at this moment all my fears were brought to the table and my heart was racing. I was
sweating on the inside, praying that this incident wouldn’t get out of hand. And I was looking for a way out.

But the question I really asked was how I could allow one customer to make me question myself and what I know best: McDonald’s. From KVS (Kitchen Video System) to UHC (Universal Holding Cabinets), I have trained over forty people and set a record of closing a store in forty minutes. So if she would not give me the respect I worked hard for, she could take her business somewhere else.
MEN I’VE LOVED

Arvilla Kern, teacher

I’ve been very lucky in the men I’ve known. Maybe I’ve had a certain intuition about men I should stay away from.

My Dad was a good man, but a “cool” father. He was a father of the 1950’s. He felt that since he did not have boys, mom should rear the girls. So he went to work, earned a good living, and had very little to do or say about his daughters’ lives. However, he did drive us everywhere.

The first young men I dated were all from my neighborhood, or my church, or my school. They were all fun and intelligent; some were even Eagle Scouts. I had a sheltered childhood, where neither parent encouraged me to date. They, especially, didn’t want me to be in cars with other teenagers. I got a driver’s license, but I really did not drive much, until I got a job and bought my own used car at the age of twenty-one.

I commuted to a local state college and lived at home. I dated the same guy for more than three years, until he went off to Vietnam. His parents thought we would marry. I thought we would probably marry, but it just didn’t feel right.

While he was in Vietnam, I fell for someone else. I told that boyfriend about my boyfriend in Vietnam and said I couldn’t break off with him while he was in Vietnam. When he returned, I broke off with him in my parents’ driveway. At that time it was the hardest thing I’ve ever done.

I’m still with the other guy. We’ve been married thirty-seven years, have two grown children, and a good life.

Maybe I’ve just been lucky, or maybe I’ve just known which men to stay away from.
I can remember the first book I ever read. It was about a woman traveling back in time where she happened to run into her ancestors. Ever since I read it, I’ve wondered about my own ancestors.

I was in sixth grade when I first received the book. A couple of Students at the Center (SAC) members and I had just finished performing a play about Homer Plessy and the fight for racial justice in New Orleans. All of the SAC members were in school at Frederick Douglass High, but I wasn’t. My cousin and sister were working with UrbanHeart, an after school program that involved Douglass SAC students helping those of us who were younger with reading and writing and performing.

After rehearsal one day, Mr. Randels was getting ready to take me home. We got into the car, and it was dead silent. “So Kirsten, what books have you read lately?” he asked.

What a way to break the silence, I thought to myself.

“Um *The Cat in the Hat* I think.”

“Well we got to change that. I got some books in the back, if you’re interested.”

“Oh,” I replied.

I reached into the back and grabbed the stack of books he had sitting on the seat. I went through all the books, and one stood out to me, *Kindred*, just because it started with a k. I decided that this would be the book that I wouldn’t read.

We arrived in front of my house. As I was getting out Mr. Randels said, “that’s a good book you chose.”

“Ok, thanks.”

I went inside to my room and threw the book on the dresser with no intentions of reading it. A week passed, and I didn’t even look at the book. That next Tuesday I got punished for skipping school. So I was
stuck inside with no TV. Since I had nothing to do, I had to find ways to occupy my time. First I tried exercising, but I got tired too fast. Then I tried cleaning, but the bleach was getting to me. Finally I tried studying, but I lost interest. So I just flopped on my bed and counted the dots on the ceiling. Out of my peripheral vision I saw the book. I went over picked it up and started reading Octavia Butler’s *Kindred.*
SAFE HOUSES

Naila Campbell, McMain Secondary School

It’s funny the people we feel safest with.
Most people would think I’m crazy.
But I feel what I feel.
A man on the verge of seventy
AND in a wheelchair,
What kind of safety could he provide?
If only you knew.
The future means nothing.
It’s the past that makes the difference.
Oh, the stories I’ve heard
About the man who did what most wouldn’t even dream about.
And let’s not forget about the frail woman with epilepsy.
Now I must be crazy!
But again, if only you knew.
She has endured more than three men put together
And made it out on top.
When I am scared,
They are who I run to.
When I am around them,
No one can hurt me.
The man in the wheelchair
And the woman with epilepsy:
They are my safe houses.
AFTERWORD
AFTERWORD:
You can’t really and fully “be” who you are until you “know” who you are and want to become.

WE LIVE IN CHANGING TIMES. Why state the obvious? Because while it is obvious that we live in changing times, too often we keep on trying to live our lives as though things were not changing—or at least accept those old expectations as the measure of our lives.

Although our schools are charged with the responsibility of preparing youth for the future, the truth is most of our education is mired in traditional ideals. Most of the traditions we teach are not only inconsistent with the realities we face, the traditional ideals are also impossible to implement—in fact, some would even argue that the “traditional ideas” about social relationships, were just that: “ideas”—ideas that had nothing to do with the realities of daily life for the majority of people.

We at Students at the Center believe that education should be for the benefit of making our lives and our communities better and more beautiful. We stress that education should not be focused solely on individual achievement and that we should pay equal if not more attention to community improvement.

We believe in starting with what we know and beginning with where we are. In other words we are materialists rather than idealists in our educational practice. We attempt to achieve praxis rather than practice metaphysics.

What does all of the above have to do with Men We Love / Men We Hate? That’s a good question and a key to fully appreciating this book.

I started working with Students at the Center in school year 1997/98. It didn’t take long for me to appreciate that dealing with male/female social relations was one of the major issues facing our young people. During the course of the school year, after listening to and talking with youth and after processing other information and outlooks that
I had on the subject of social relations, I began to understand that the paradigm was wrong. More importantly, I began to be able to specify what was wrong and why.

Think about what is normal. What do we mean when we say normal? What do we mean when we say natural or when we use the term “unnatural” to apply to social relations, especially sexual activity?

Normal is the usual condition or quantity. Normal is not a moral judgment. In a social context, “normal” is simply what prevails for most people. Single parent households are normal. In the sense of a male parent living on the premises with the female parent and their children, fatherlessness is normal.

Should living without fathers present be normal? No. Is that social absence desirable? No. Is it the condition for the majority of Black and poor youth in America? Yes.

And here is where our SAC praxis—the practical way we apply our ideas—makes a difference in the classroom.

We believe that the actual lives of our students should be at the center of our curriculum. We don’t start by trying to teach them to be something they are not: we start by recognizing who they are and helping them to sort out what it means to be who they are.

Together we set goals for where we want to go—what we want to learn and why. Of course, we teachers have to deal with rendering unto Cesar. Yes, we have state guidelines to meet, guidelines that set minimum requirements and include specific texts we are required to teach and specific tests our students are required to pass. But generally speaking, state guidelines are easy to deal with once we are clear on who, what and why.

Who are our students? What can they do well and what areas do they need to work on developing? Why do we choose to teach whatever we choose and of what use is our teaching to our students? What do our students want to learn and why do they want to learn those things? These are a few of the questions we explore together.

Using the SAC methodology makes it possible for our students to deal with issues that are generally ignored in the educational process but are issues that deeply affect a student’s willingness and ability to succeed educationally.
Students often start off the school year believing that they are abnormal. They think the problems they have are individual problems. That something is wrong with them as an individual.

It is liberating to know that our problems are “normal” problems. We are not alone. Once we recognize that the fault lies not in the stars, nor in ourselves alone, but rather in the social systems that dominate us, then we can realistically begin to change our situations for the better.

To bring about positive change it is not enough to be dissatisfied. We must understand our problems or risk replicating the problems under the guise of solving the problem. Becoming a master is not a solution to ending slavery.

Developing positive male/female relations will require us to go beyond simply making an analysis of patriarchy and sexism. We will need to investigate our beliefs and behaviors on the question of what does it mean to be a woman/man in today’s world.

Hopefully, this afterword helps clarify what we are doing with our students. Although it is tempting to just call writing about one’s problems a form of therapy, I reject that as a catch all description. If we stopped at just expressing our selves, yes it would simply be therapy. But our goal is nothing less than teaching our students to take charge of their lives and to work for the betterment of their communities.

Yes, we want to change our world. Yes, we are writing for change. Yes, this goes far, far beyond teaching an individual to adjust to or cope with the harsh realities of life. We want to transform our lives and our communities and not simply survive in a world where someone else makes the decisions about the material and social conditions under which we struggle to live.

We call this book *Men We Love/Men We Hate* because we are dealing with a complex social situation, a complexity that consumes all of us as we become adults faced with the task of living our lives as functional human beings who are “normally” categorized as women and men.

The first step in achieving our objective is to develop consciousness. We must learn who we are. We must recognize what is our social situation. Then we can make decisions about who we want to become and what type of world we want to construct. In the process we attempt to create what we desire.
In large and small ways, to differing degrees, every individual attempts to create what they desire. Our approach is to identify not only what are our desires but also who we are and why we desire what we desire.

When we prompt our students to approach their lives from this pedagogical perspective, they produce work that resonates with the vibration of truth and beauty even as they are often examining lies and social ugliness.

Yes, the truth will set you free. But it is also true that it is difficult to live the truth. For us as human beings, being truthful means much more than simply being factual, but at the same time we can not tell the truth without dealing with the facts of our lives.

Recognizing and sorting out our beliefs (i.e. ideals), our own facts (i.e. material and social realities), and our deepest desires (emotional and intellectual goals and objectives) is the crucial component of the SAC pedagogy.

Figuring out who we are, what our conditions are, who we want to become, what conditions we want to achieve, and figuring out how to actualize the transition from the here and now to the there and tomorrow, that’s our task.

So we start with what we know to learn what we don’t know, and start with where we’re at to get to where we want to go. It is neither obvious nor easy, but it is necessary and transforming if we are to live as productive and healthy human beings.

Kalamu ya Salaam

New Orleans, LA

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Students at the Center (SAC) is an independent program that since 1996 has worked within public schools in New Orleans. The students of SAC participate through English and elective writing and social studies classes in their schools. We teach both regular and advanced core curriculum classes that are open to all students. In addition to the daily classes, since Hurricane Katrina, SAC graduates have worked as key staff members, serving as resource teachers in public school classrooms, organizers for youth involvement, and producers of youth media.

For more information on Students at the Center visit the following web sites or contact Jim Randels at jimrandelssac@earthlink.net

http://www.sacnola.com/menwelove/

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/nola_voices/