

New Jersey Literacy Association 2021 Writing Contest



Grade 7 Honorees

Anya Alston, Thompson Middle School, Middletown

Madeline Ferguson, Thompson Middle School, Middletown

Kyla Kidorf, William R. Satz Middle School, Holmdel

Tvisha Reikhy, Heritage Middle School, Livingston

Anna Wang, Heritage Middle School, Livingston

Anya Alston

Personal Narrative - Dungeon of Solitude

I remove the cloth that encircles my lower face. The cloth is just another reminder of these 405 days of despair and grief. Of course, I haven't had any grief of my own, but the way I feel these days could almost be synonymous with grief. School has lately felt like a burden, the masks are constantly restricting, and the obligation to be perfect still entraps me in its web. Of course, no one is pushing me to be perfect, but more like myself. I've always sensed the need to push myself, whether it'd be in receiving another A or planning for my success in the real world. But this uneasy sensation I felt at the moment was different than usual. As I trudged home from school today, mask in one hand and phone in the other, I made an astonishing discovery within myself.

For the past 405 days, I've trapped myself in a dungeon of solitude, shutting out everyone I am fond of. This act wasn't intentional, rather by habit. Between family complications and medical issues before COVID-19, I've tended to push away existing loved ones. Frankly, I'm not transcendent with feelings. When my parents went through a divorce when at 9, I screamed and threw tantrums. When I was diagnosed with scoliosis at 11, I habitually ran away rather than to deal with what is. When the Pandemic hit, I finally lost control of all self-awareness. At that moment, I made the worst decision of my life: To shut out all my friends and family.

While other girls in the sixth grade were having hangouts and sleepovers, I was sitting around doing nothing. Being excluded didn't bother me, so ending my little games were never considered. Although I was unaffected by my new ways, the seclusion did take a toll on my mother. She encouraged me to have fun with my friends, in spite of the fact that I never wanted to. I gave her such a hard time on this subject. Nonetheless, it did get to the point where she asked me every weekend if I wanted to plan get-togethers.

Backtracking to today, I watched my surroundings enclose before my eyes. An abundance of trees, cars, and shame, all accessible at the touch of a fingertip. The shame was digging a hole inside of me. Shame for my actions. Shame for my turbulent and selfish behaviors. Shame for my habits within the last 405 days. No one in my life deserved the treatment I was addressing. I picked up the pace of my stride to a maximum. Abruptly, tears inside me gushed forward. What have I done?

Did I display such actions to act as a reminder? A reminder that I'll never be able to obtain friendships as my peers do? Or possibly because I've always viewed life differently than everyone else? Whatever the case was, my feelings will always be under the debt of the people I love. Notwithstanding my abnormal tendencies, the only person I've seemed to hurt is myself. Tossing away all possible connections without consent, now that's a punishment. And now's my time to face it head-on.

Madeline Ferguson

Over the course of my life, I have learned many different life lessons. Never take advantage of someone, money doesn't buy happiness, good things don't come easy, I heard it all. But, there is one life lesson that I have learned which truly sticks out to me: Never take life for granted. I have always known that you should never take life for granted, but I learned the importance of our lives when COVID-19 hit America in 2020.

When the coronavirus first came to America, it seemed like the most frightening thing ever and life-threatening. Well, that's because it was. Millions of people began dying when the pandemic began- and that was in just a few weeks! All over the world people started to worry and stress out in fear that the deadly virus would come into their very own house and kill them. Which, believe me, my parents were definitely one of those people. And then quarantine started which made people go even crazier.

Remember that whole shortage of toilet paper in the beginning of quarantine? I sure do, there were dozens of toilet paper rolls in my house! This was caused by hysteria and thought that the whole world was going to end soon, which wasn't a thought that was very unbelievable.

People all around the world started to experience depression and loneliness due to family and friends passing away from getting the coronavirus. COVID-19 has hit us all hard between losing jobs or your closest friend or family member. I myself have experienced several sad and sorrowful moments during this pandemic. During this pandemic, my uncle got diagnosed with dementia and cannot remember many things, which added more stress and anxiety to me and my family's life. Every day and night I pray that he and my family will get through this stressful year together and everything will be alright. Unfortunately, we know that is not how 2020 likes things.

It's December 31, 2020 and everyone is counting down to the new year...3...2...1...Happy New Year! It's 2021! Yay! COVID-19 is over! 2021 is going to be a great year! Goodbye 2020! The first day of school in 2021 comes along, and everyone is so excited there is no more COVID to worry about...and then 8 kids get sent home because they were exposed to the coronavirus. Oh come on!

Although the coronavirus has many negatives such as quarantine and millions of people dying, there are some benefits. Some may say that quarantine was the worst thing ever because you could not see anyone for months meanwhile, the people who mean the most to you were living in the very same house as you.

I was furious when I found out that I would have to be stuck quarantined with my family for months, but as soon as I realized how much fun spending so much time with my family was, I didn't want quarantine to end! My family and I put on themed dinners, plays, and made up our own dances! Over quarantine I learned that I should not only take life for granted, but I should not take my family for granted. I realized that I am not going to have my family forever, so I have to make the best of my life with my family for as long as I have them.

After all that has happened in this past year, I think that it is safe to say that almost everyone across the globe has learned that life is short so you should never take it for granted.

Simple comfort

by Kyla Kidorf

Grade 7

William R. Satz Middle School

Holmdel, NJ

It's so weird how such a simple thing can make you feel.

The bear soap.
The way that I would turn it over in my hands
Over
And over
And over

And she would smile softly over my shoulder
At the small, mint green bear
Overpowering my even tinier hands
I would smile back
As she would put her more experienced
Weathered hands
Over mine

I would stand on their stool
In the vibrant seafoam colored bathroom
With the old wallpaper surrounding me
Just barely clinging onto the walls

With the sun shining through the small window
That I couldn't reach

And every time I went to their house
I always used
The special soap

And when it inevitably whittled away to nothing
And when she
Whittled away to nothing
And the smell had faded away to nothing

I stand here, alone
I can reach the window now
And I look into the mirror

With my hands empty.

Fearing Failure

Tvisha Reikhy

Heritage Middle School

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My fingers drummed nervously against the dashboard to the tune of a country song playing on the radio. My mind was a raging tornado, filled with the sharp, rigid thoughts about failure. My stomach lurched as we hurtled along the highway, coming closer to the fields that would determine my reputation.

"Take the exit on the right." The monotone voice of the GPS shook me away from my dreadful thoughts. I glanced at my phone, and was terrified by what I saw: we were arriving in less than 10 minutes.

"So, are you excited for your first softball game?" my dad asked cheerfully as he drank his coffee.

"I guess," I replied quietly, turning away so that he wouldn't see me gnawing at my already damaged nails. My breath quickened as the arrival time decreased once again. We sat in silence, and I was left alone with my distressing thoughts. I could just imagine myself heading to the plate, striking out within seconds, and dragging myself back to the dugout, only to be greeted by snickers.

The scorching sun blazed through my window, as I started to sweat even though the air condition was blasting. I felt suffocated by the bitter smell of coffee, and gagged.

You can do this.

No you can't, and you never will, an obnoxious voice snarled.

I tried to close my eyes and give myself a pep talk, but there was no hope. Maybe I couldn't do this. Maybe this sport wasn't for me.

"You have arrived at your destination." No. I can't do this. I'm going to strike out and make a fool of myself, and fail, and---

"So, Tvisha, just remember what the coach told you, extend through the ball," my dad's gentle but firm voice declared.

I looked out the window and saw my team practicing on the field, smiles on their faces as they practiced in the batting cages, all of them smacking the ball right in its face.

"I'm afraid to strike out. I- I don't think I want to play today," I whispered, cringing slightly just thinking about my demise.

My father studied my face for a few seconds. He looked me in the eye and paused, as if he was choosing his words carefully. "Failing is not something you should be afraid of. What you *should* be terrified of is quitting because you are afraid to fail. Yes, you may strike out today, and the time after that. But what matters is how you turn your failures into success. If you work hard, you'll hit home runs like you never imagined. Do you really want to turn that opportunity down just because you are afraid to miss the ball. Afraid of failing?" I paused for a moment, envisioning myself hitting a homerun, as my team ran out of the dugout, hugging me. Could that really be me? Yes, a tiny voice that was once silenced murmured in my head.

I looked at my dad and nodded. “Dad,” I declared, a little more power in my voice, “I’m going to go out there and give it my all. And if I strike out, it just tells me that I need to work harder.”

“That’s my girl, show’em what you got!” my dad exclaimed, as he high fived me. I stepped out of the car, and breathed the surrounding air. It smelled like fresh dirt after it had just rained. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, and slowly walked out to my team, into the setting sun, into a whole ocean of endless possibilities.

Chrysanthemums

Anna Wang

7th Grade

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When my parents brought home the chrysanthemum, I disliked it immediately. It didn't even have any flowers. Only lustreless green buds. It was the opposite of the chrysanthemum that my grandfather had planted, which was a vivid mixture of violet and hibiscus and was outlined with gold when the sun shone on it with its evening rays. It was as if the sun had been compared to the dump, one vibrant, one dreary.

The new chrysanthemum was to be planted right away, my mother told me. And from then on, I would be in charge of watering both chrysanthemums, every single day. I told my mother that I did not like the new one, and she knew I didn't. But she said to be patient, and maybe one day I will like it. After all, she said, you'll never know what it might grow into.

So from that day on, I watered them. Every single day. I watched them grow flowers, many flowers. I saw them bloom, but my feelings towards them hadn't changed. After all, even though the new chrysanthemum bloomed, it was still an unattractive shade of mustard. It's blossoms were large — only for a week. The next week, the unappealing flowers had drooping petals, as if even blooming once had used up their weak supply of energy. They wilted, turning an ugly shade of rust, that surely meant death. As if they knew, no matter how they bloomed, they would never be loved.

I'm not sure that my parents even saw the new chrysanthemum in their prime of youth.

The other chrysanthemum was blooming furiously, unfurling their magenta petals, thin and soft, filled with life and energy. It stood proudly in the afternoon sun, soaking up rays, spreading its scent into the wind. I watched.

I did not feel pleasure. I did not feel proud. Instead, I felt guilty. Not because my favored chrysanthemum grew so beautifully, and the new one did not. It was because I had judged the chrysanthemum on its colors and turned on it coldly, while showering the other one with love and adoration.

But it was only mid fall, I still had time. I watered both from then on with the equal gentleness and told my mother proudly about how well their leaves grew.

But in winter, they turned a pale brown. Their flowers wrinkled and fell. Their leaves withered and died. I watched. I asked if they would bloom again in the spring. My mother assured me that they would. So yet again, I waited. I watched.

Now it is late spring, my chrysanthemums are still asleep. Still brown, withered, and dry. I go to see them each day, but they are gone. The winter cold has taken them away. I still hope that maybe in fall, they will bloom. And then, I promise,

that I will admire both of them. But perhaps, it really is too late. Perhaps time has taken them away. But until then, I will watch.