



**TESTIFY: MEMOIR AS A TOOL  
FOR BUILDING A MOVEMENT**

# Freedom Forum

## 2023



Presented by:

*Herstory*  
WRITERS NETWORK

The Humanities Institute  
at Stony Brook University,  
ERASE Racism,  
Adelphi School  
of Social Work,  
and Babylon Citizens  
Council on the Arts.

Reaching our hands across  
the community to lift our  
voices together for justice  
one story at a time.



# The Age of Legality

Kris Janvier

Hempstead High School, Class of 2013

I am still psychologically infected this semester. Why? Because waking up every morning feeling ready and steady, performing personal hygiene to be clean, wearing wrinkled clothes, looking back and forth at the digital clock from the Cablevision cable box only to manage time to eat breakfast. Well it's 11:50 am. I gotta get outta here. Gotta leave, I said to myself. I was manhandling my conscience to stay convinced. My mind was playing tricks on me. Finally, I exited out of the bedroom.

"Bonjour." "Bonjour, petit moi." Me and my step-aunt greeted each other passively. Her care assistant joined her. They were both in her bedroom politicking every morning.

After I dashed downstairs. "Mommy, I'm leaving!" I shouted in my deep morning voice. Mom was lying in bed in her bedroom with the door locked. No knobs, one keyhole. "Oh. You're leaving, Sweetie?" she responded with the hoarseness that occurs only in the morning. "Yes." "Ou pren bagay pou maje?" "No. I'll eat at the campus." "You have money in your card?" "Yes." "How much?" "A dollar" "Come to my room and take my work bag for me." I quickly took the bag from one of the large bins in front of her bed. "Take out my wallet. And in that wallet there is twenty dollars. Take it," she said. I reluctantly took the money, kissed her on the cheek and dashed out of the diamond-glass back door from the stuffy kitchen.

Now I gotta run through Main Street to get to the terminal. The MTA bus fare has been raised by 25 cents. The bus drivers are on the money now, I supposed. They used to be late on purpose. My legs are burning from all this running. Dehydration. Hunger. No money to buy food and a drink, but the card has been refilled. I find it hard to ask people for money. And I'm not trying to think about a job because I don't want it to become a burden to my college education. Distress, I tell ya. Distress.

One slide for \$2.75 after surviving a long line of hopelessness and oppression and homelessness and famishedness. Hempstead, I will see you later in hopes that you treat people better and give the wheelchair man some money for a good recovery. He's gonna need it.

Sincerely yours, Kris. “You got some money for some coffee?” the wheelchair man asked with a soft dying tone. I gazed at him staring at me and for the numerous times for... I don’t know how many months I’ve seen him, it’s been a while. For the umpteenth time I told him, “No, I don’t have any money on me.” I’m just like him, I wished I could tell him, but I was nervous. Nervous that he was going to do something to me on a felony level. Confusion on my part. It seems that he has boarded the bus — he has paid the fare — yet he is in dialogue with the wheelchair man, who I imagine is not on the bus.

The bus door opened and I turned my head towards the Long Island bus. The line was moving slow. Nervousness transformed into anxiousness. Slow-ass passengers. I can still see the wheelchair man out of the side of my eye. Now he was staring at the other bus-waiters. Even they denied to serve him. I wasn’t worried about the other bums that were talking amongst each other. Bum stories, I’m listening. Frankly, I’m interested in them. Just not in the morning. Finally, I’m next. I quickly shifted inside the bus and inserted the Metro-card in the slot to scan it. Two seconds later, the card popped up and I looked over at the little red screen: 18-something dollars. That was all it had left. I was searching for a seat, but everything was taken by these zombies. Even though there were open seats next to the windows, they would not let you through. I hated when they did that. I mean, what is so difficult for you to sit next to the window? I mean, you could’ve saved lives by leaving an open seat by the walkway. Anyway, each its own right? Spring had just begun and it was sunny but cold in Hempstead. Daylight Savings Time means less sleep for the common folk. Anxiousness turns to guilt. It’s embarrassing to worry about the seats when the wheelchair man and the bums are outside in the cold. We’re from the same ghetto. Black and oppressed under these flashy shoes of the system. It was just that I had the privilege that he lost. If only I had enough money—if only. And for the next half hour, the same thought occurred when I saw another bum sitting outside of the Hicksville train station.

The shuttle bus had arrived. Another bus ride and I am hungry as hell. Class was about to start and I’m contemplating whether I want to go to class or not. The stereo was blasting Power 105.1. The same songs are in rotation again. I checked the forums in my Galaxy just to be let down by a lack of new music rumors, and there were so many colleagues whispering. The psychological game had just begun. Newbridge, Broadway, North of Route 107. From Hicksville to Jericho to the edge of Brookville. The gate is on the left side, so why won’t you run the light? There are no cars around. Just turn left and we’re there, I thought eagerly. I just want the class to be over quick because there is a possibility that I could find that girl that gave me butterflies.

I hopped out of the shuttle bus and dashed down the pathway full of geese, hoping that I make it to class. These random thoughts are racing against me. My Polo boots. Cannot match its speed. It's like I can see my thoughts drift behind each other, and they vanish in their tire smoke. My train of thought was long enough to tie up a human body. Why did I have these thoughts? Was it because of my mom's expectations? I've been thinking too long and hard about these plans that my mom envisioned: Good school. Scholarships. More money. Good wife. Good career. Nice house. My motor license. Be a good Christian. Kids. The more I thought about it, the more apathetic I would be. That was one of the reasons why I've procrastinated a lot ever since I set foot on this campus. It was the fear of her going against what I know based on culture, religion, values, etc... I appreciate her lessons and I know she meant well for more than a decade trying to raise two kids. For more than a decade, she kept the love fresh with my stepfather, who rescued her from the house fire of agony, sadness, anger, anxiety, pain from back in the '90s. I love both of them, but their disciplinary skills made me even more self-conscious and curious, and one day I am looking to rebel against their priorities. Everybody got their own judgment on the college boy: Me, the anomaly. I am that. Twenty-one. The age of legality. I should feel the need to drink, but I don't feel like it. I never do. Maybe, after... when Mom becomes an American citizen.

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Kris began his journey with Herstory when he was a senior at Hempstead High School, when he and his classmates were bused every week to write with Hofstra students of criminology and sociology. For three years as he struggled with the realities of college against a backdrop of poverty, hunger and worry about saving his mother, he reconnected with Herstory wherever his school placements would allow, continuing to grow as a writer with a poetry laced with his native Creole rhythms that tell the whole story of the world that students who haven't even enough money for bus fare face daily. He has developed this story into a performance piece.



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# Sólo somos viajeros

Breisi Juárez

Hempstead High School, Class of 2022

1. Sin duda alguna cada día mejoramos. Cada día consciente o inconscientemente buscamos la comodidad y la felicidad.

Without a doubt everyday we improve. Everyday, consciously or unconsciously, we look for comfort and happiness.

Sans aucun doute, nous nous améliorons chaque jour. Chaque jour, consciemment ou inconsciemment, nous recherchons le confort et le bonheur.

San okenn dout, nap amelyore chak jou. Chak jou, konsyan oswa enkonsyaman, nou chèche konfò ak bonè.

2. Se páramos y comparamos el pasado en todo su esplendor al presente, son situaciones considerables. Entiendo que este mundo es simple. Permite adornarla para darle su sentido pero también estar presente con su realidad.

If we stop and contemplate the past in all its splendor to the present, are considerable situations. I understand that this world is simple, allows to adorn it, to give it its meaning, but it is also be present with its reality.

On s'arrête et on compare le passé dans toute sa splendeur au présent, ce sont des situations considérables. Je comprends que ce monde est simple. Il permet de le décorer pour lui donner son sens mais aussi d'être présent à sa réalité.

Nou sispann epi konpare sot pase a nan tout bèl li ak prezan an, sa yo se sitiasyon konsiderab. Mwen konprann ke mond sa a se senp. Li pèmèt ou dekore li pou bay li sans men tou pou prezan nan reyelite li.

3. Observó que unos se quieren comer el mundo y todas las maravillas que existe en ello. Pero otros quieren vomitar el mundo y dejar de existir junto con todo. Eres consciente que ahora sólo somos viajeros?

I see that some want to eat the world and all the wonders in it. Others want to throw up the world and cease to exist along with everything. Are you aware that now we are just travelers?

Il a observé que certains veulent manger le monde et toutes les merveilles qui y existent. Mais d'autres veulent bouleverser le monde et cesser d'exister avec tout. Savez-vous que maintenant nous ne sommes que des voyageurs?

Li te obsève ke kèk vle manje mond lan ak tout bèl bagay ki egziste nan li. Men, lòt moun vle vire mond lan tèt anba epi sispann egziste ak tout bagay. Èske w konnen kounye a nou se jis vwayajè?

# I Cannot be Scared Anymore

Medjina Chery

Uniondale High School, Class of 2023

Being raised in a Caribbean household is really a hard challenge; But being gay in a Caribbean household is even harder. Not only because you have learned to hide who you are but also to please people about things they want you to do. They're always trying to create scenarios in their head for you to follow, then leaving you with no room to grow, explore, or take part in any of your own interests. Personally, I have hidden so much to please my parents, but I had a moment where I realized: I cannot be scared anymore- I cannot worry anymore - but I can be who I am genuinely.

It has been really challenging because every time I try to be myself, I always get my self-esteem broken down. **I have worn a heavy blanket of insecurity** because I know my parents won't allow me to be gay. they're scared of how society will view me, and I can't blame them. But I do believe that everybody has the right to be who they are, not what people think of them and although I really try my best to please my parents, **this year, I say it's time to put myself first.**

I wasn't making myself happy, and the doubt made me feel like I wasn't good enough. For society, my parents or myself. Asking myself what I can do to make them more proud I was really forcing myself to become someone just because I was living in the big picture that my parents created for me. They have their own personal beliefs which are mostly focusing on my education and things they have done for me. If I tried to show who I am, in general, not only in academic settings, they see it as disrespect when's is really not- I just want closure. I really don't care how society views me because my sexuality doesn't define who I am if I choose to be gay. If I want to have piercings. I'm going to have piercings.. For right now when I look at it I'm really happy with the person I'm becoming and yes I am happy to say I'm a lesbian. I know it will take time for my

parents to accept this decision of mine- and if breaking the rules is needed to find your happiness then I will do just that.

**For people who are struggling with the same situation I want to say**

- I understand what you going through and look, it's not going to be easy, it will take a lot of breakdowns and low self-esteem to be the real you, and everything will take time don't let what people say define who you are because regardless you're still going to be talked about
- just have a lot of faith in yourself because, at the end of the day, you decide on what you want to do.

**That's what I've been doing and I think I'm doing just fine.**





# Barbie's "PERFECT" Life

Astrid Lopez

Westbury High School, Class of 2022

Barbie is every girl's dream. With a perfect face, perfect hair, perfect body, and a "perfect life".

To the point that they begin to become obsessed with their body, their physical appearance, and their beauty.

I was one of those girls. Obsessed with fitting into the beauty standards that society sets for us at an early age. Like a parasite that devours us from the inside transforming us into something, we are not.

I remember that when I lived in Honduras my body never mattered much to me. Nor my weight since I have always been chubby. I never had any problems with my body, but everything changed when I came to the United States. Middle school girls who were already dressing like 20 and 23-year-old women wearing makeup and obsessed with photos. Their poor minds had no room for school classes and lessons. But, if you asked them what brand of makeup they used, they answered in seconds. I didn't know what to do and little by little my appearance began to be a problem.

I remember that I used to love it when my mom would style my hair with the braids she made for me or the ponytails. She loved the clothes she bought me, colorful and bright, but, over time, they stopped being colorful and their shine faded. I was embarrassed to arrive at school with the braids and the "baby" clothes that I once loved so much.

Every day before I got to school I would undo my braids and cover my clothes with a sweater or a jacket. I started to hate everything I once loved and adored, including that hair routine I always had with my mom. I no longer let her touch my hair. My clothes went from being full color to black and white. I never told her what was happening to me. On the contrary, I only told her that I had grown up and no longer needed her to do my hair. Within a year, I was a completely different person and within three years I started hating my body, my height, and my hair. I was no longer a small and cute short "little girl or grown woman". I was not frail and my body was no longer thin and fine. On the contrary, I was strong and stocky. My hair was not straight neat. It was short and curly. I was a basketball player who was 5'10 and not a perfect and delicate Barbie. I would wonder "Why am I like this?" "How can I change?" I would like to be like her. Her body is beautiful; she is absolutely perfect. And I am not.

Our society poisoned my mind and the minds of many other girls to the point that I asked my mother for weight loss surgery. My mom was angry with tears in her eyes, asking me, "Why?". I did not have a correct or certain answer since I only thought about changing my physique, face, and appearance. She grabbed my face and told me how perfect I was. But, at that time I did not listen to what she said because one of my aunts and my cousin always told me, "If you were a little thinner you would be more beautiful." "Get surgery and you will lose weight faster," they would tell me. My parents began to dislike my aunt and my cousin to the point that they didn't leave me alone with them so they wouldn't poison my mind and my innocence anymore. But, it still wasn't enough. My aunts weren't the only thing poisoning me. Soon after, I started using Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. At that time, I did not know that not everything is what it seems. Models with a waist so small that it seems that they could not breathe. Skin as

soft and delicate as porcelain dolls. I felt like a creepy Monster High doll in a world full of Barbie's perfectly designed to meet the standards of our sick society.

After three years my self-esteem began to grow. I am not 100% sure of my myself and my body, but I hope I can love myself just the way I am.



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# Are you enjoying your moment?

Breisi Juárez

Hempstead High School, Class of 2022

1. Sólo somos viajeros, y al terminar este viaje llamado vida tenemos que pagar una deuda llamada muerte.

We are just travelers and at the end of this journey called life we have to pay a debt called death.

Nous ne sommes que des voyageurs, et à la fin de ce voyage appelé vie, nous devons payer une dette appelée mort.

Nou se vwayajè sèlman, epi nan fen vwayaj sa a ki rele lavi, nou dwe peye yon dèt ki rele lanmò.

2. Estoy de acuerdo que la mayoría de situaciones y decisiones dependen de la perspectiva. La mayoría piensa que debe amamantar la esperanza en el interior, y disfrutar el momento que es lo único que tenemos seguro. No sabes cuanto tiempo queda. El futuro es incierto. Disfruta tu momento. Disfruta el momento. Con esos párpados caídos y esa cara exhausta, ¿estás disfrutando tu momento?

I agree that most situations and decisions depend on perspective. Most think you should nurse hope inside, and enjoy the moment that is the only thing we have for sure. You don't know how much time we have left. The future is uncertain. Enjoy your moment. Enjoy the moment. With those droopy eyelids and that exhausted face, are you enjoying your moment?

Je conviens que la plupart des situations et des décisions dépendent de la perspective. La plupart des gens pensent qu'ils devraient garder espoir en eux et profiter du moment présent, ce qui est la seule chose dont nous

sommes sûrs. Vous ne savez pas combien de temps il vous reste. L'avenir est incertain. Profitez de votre moment. Profiter du moment. Avec ces paupières tombantes et ce visage épuisé, appréciez-vous votre moment?

Mwen dakò ke pifò sitiyasyon ak desizyon depann sou pèspektiv. Pifò moun panse ke yo ta dwe rete espwa epi jwi moman prezan an, ki se sèl bagay nou asire w. Ou pa konnen konbyen tan ou rete. Tan kap vini an ensèten. Jwi moman w la. Jwi moman sa a. Avèk po je sa yo ki tonbe ak figi sa a fin itilize, èske w ap jwi moman ou a?

**Wyandanch High School**  
**Mrs. D'Martino's Class**

Si tus palabras tuvieran el poder...  
*If your words had the power...*

**Daniela Benítez**

*Si pudiera cambiar algo, sería el bullying y las injusticias porque con esto, muchas personas viven atemorizadas. Todos somos iguales; tratémoslos como tal. Seamos justos, tratémoslos como nos gustaría ser tratados. Todos juntos podemos cambiar el mundo.*

If I could change something, it would be bullying and injustices because with these, many people live in fear. We are all equal; let's treat each other as such. Let's be fair, let's treat each other the way we would like to be treated. Together, we can change the world.

**Linda Bonilla**

*Si mis palabras tuvieran el poder de cambiar algo, cambiaría la inseguridad de nosotros mismos. Diría: "Cree en tí mismo" porque cada persona es capaz de lograr lo que se propone. "Admira tu mismo la fuerza que haz tenido para llegar hasta a donde estas; equivocarse es de humanos"*

If my words had the power to change something, I would change our self-doubt. I would say, "Believe in yourself" because every person is capable of achieving what they set out to do. "Admire the strength you've had to get to where you are; making mistakes is human."

**Heidyly K. Manzanarez**

*Si mis palabras tuvieran la capacidad de cambiar algo, cambiaría la forma en que las personas se miran y se tratan entre sí. Haría que aceptaran más las diferencias y se trataran de la misma forma sin tener que hacer sentir mal a los demás, sin importar sus cualidades. Que se trataran igual porque todos tenemos los mismos derechos.*

If my words had the power to change something, I would change how people look at and treat each other. I would make them accept differences more and treat each other the same way without making others feel bad, regardless of their qualities. Treat each other equally because we all have the same rights.

### **Hector Ato**

*Si mis palabras pudieran cambiar algo, me gustaria cambiar la forma en que las personas piensan que son los demas en base a como cada uno se ve, ya sea por el sexo, religion, economia, preferencias, color de piel, lugar de origen u otros factores. Existen muchas personas que tienden a minimizar actos que dañan a otros y por eso se produce el racismo, bullying y abuso. Al haber personas que piensan diferente sobre otros y comparten sus opiniones hirientes, muchas más van a pensar como ellas. Estas opiniones crecen y se convierten en ataques que dañan física y emocionalmente a otros. Al final, hay personas que se dan cuenta de lo que hacen con comentarios sobre otros sin en realidad conocer a fondo y ver de qué estamos hechos cada uno. ¿Por qué existen personas que prefieren opinar sin conocerlo a uno a fondo? Todos deberíamos ver la chispa que cada persona posee, la que nos hace a cada uno de nosotros especiales.*

If my words could change something, I would like to change the way people perceive others based on how each person looks, whether it's because of gender, religion, economy, preferences, skin color, place of origin, or other factors. There are many people who tend to downplay acts that harm others, and that's why racism, bullying, and abuse occur. When there are people who think differently about others and share their hurtful opinions, many more will think like them. These opinions grow and turn into attacks that harm others physically and emotionally. In the end, there are people who realize what they are doing with comments about others without really knowing each person thoroughly and seeing what we are made of. Why do some people prefer to give opinions without knowing someone deeply? We should all see the spark that each person possesses, the one that makes each of us special.

**Angel Argueta**

*Si mis palabras tuvieran el poder cambiaría el racismo hacia las personas de distinto color y distintos países. Me gustaría que todos estuviéramos juntos, unidos como una sola comunidad. Que no te critiquen por tu forma de vestir o tu físico. Me gustaría que hubiera consecuencias para las personas que lleguen a discriminar.*

If my words had the power, I would change racism towards people of different colors and countries. I would like us all to be together, united as one community. Don't be criticized for how you dress or your appearance. I wish there were consequences for people who discriminate.

**Owen Onan Pinto**

*Si mis palabras pudieran cambiar corazones, crearían una regla antiracista. Creo que el racismo es algo que se ve por todo el mundo y más aquí en Los Estados Unidos. Siento que el racismo afecta a muchas personas, las hace sentirse muy mal. Aunque esta regla ya existe, sería lo mejor que la hicieran cumplir. Que no se discrimine a las personas por su color de piel. Esto sería algo que cambiaría corazones y mentes.*

If my words could change hearts, they would create an anti-racist rule. I think racism is something seen all over the world, especially here in the United States. I feel like racism affects many people; it makes them feel really bad. Although this rule already exists, it would be best if they enforced it. Don't discriminate against people because of their skin color. This would be something that changes hearts and minds.

**Joshua Gutierrez**

*Si mis palabras tuvieran el poder de cambiar una mente, diría que dejemos de burlarnos de las demás personas. Nadie sabe lo que está pasando por la mente de otra persona. Yo lo he visto y lo he vivido. Créanme, no siempre interpretamos o entendemos como otras personas piensan.*



If my words had the power to change a mind, I would say let's stop making fun of other people. No one knows what is going on in another person's mind. I have seen it and lived it. Believe me, we don't always interpret or understand how other people think.

### **Yeison**

*Debemos de tratarnos por igual, todos somos iguales. Hay que cambiar la injusticia. No debemos juzgar a una persona sin conocerla. A veces, de los errores aprendemos. El Bullying es demasiado dañino porque toda persona se siente mal cuando la molestan por su color de piel, su pelo, etc. Se sienten demasiado mal.*

We must treat each other equally; we are all the same. Injustice has to change. We should not judge a person without knowing them. Sometimes, we learn from mistakes. Bullying is too harmful because every person feels bad when they are teased because of their skin color, hair, etc. They feel really bad

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## **Wyandanch High School Mrs. Mignanelli's Class**

### **Christopher Turnier**

*If my words had the power to change a heart, mind or a policy they would be about those who exploit their power over others based on their unjust, and bluntly, wrong beliefs on a group, especially when we rely on you to protect us. Instead of becoming a symbol of safety, they become the ones to be feared. Instead of providing comfort, they demand respect. Support your peers instead of putting them in need of support.*

Si mis palabras tuvieran el poder de cambiar un corazón, una mente o una política, serían acerca de aquellos que explotan su poder sobre otros basados en sus creencias injustas y, francamente, erróneas sobre un grupo, especialmente cuando confiamos en ustedes para protegernos. En lugar de convertirse en un símbolo de

seguridad, se convierten en aquellos a quienes tememos. En lugar de brindar consuelo, exigen respeto. Apoyen a sus compañeros en lugar de ponerlos en la necesidad de apoyo.

### **Clover Johnson**

*You say you care about the people, yet you attempt to take away basic rights to live. You hate a person just because you don't agree with who they are, how they live, what they love, who they love. We, as a society, should stop judging and assuming things upon a person. Instead, get to know them first.*

Dices que te importa la gente, sin embargo, intentas quitar nuestros derechos básicos para vivir. Odias a una persona solo porque no estás de acuerdo con quiénes son, cómo viven, qué aman, a quién aman. Nosotros, como sociedad, deberíamos dejar de juzgar y hacer suposiciones sobre una persona. En cambio, deberíamos primero conocerlos..

### **Katherine Benitez**

*If my words had the power to change a mind I would say "let's stop racism" Racism has been going on for a long time and people are still racist. People shouldn't be judged by their skin color. It is so unfair that people get treated differently just because of their skin color. People like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, fought for the rights of their people. Imagine how disappointed they would be. They fought for civil rights and there is still injustice for their people. It would be a peaceful world if we all just stopped racism and got along.*

Si mis palabras tuvieran el poder de cambiar una mente, diría "detengamos el racismo". El racismo ha estado ocurriendo durante mucho tiempo y la gente todavía es racista. Las personas no deberían ser juzgadas por el color de su piel. Es tan injusto que las personas sean tratadas de manera diferente solo por su color de piel. Personas como Martin Luther King Jr. y Malcolm X lucharon por los derechos de su gente. Imagina lo decepcionados que estarían. Lucharon por los derechos civiles y todavía hay injusticia para su gente. Sería un mundo pacífico si todos simplemente detuviéramos el racismo y nos lleváramos bien.

### **Romeo Gomez**

*If my words had the power to change a heart my words would say to never judge anyone without knowing what they're going through. We make fun of each other for our enjoyment and pleasure. Why would I choose these words? Because I know how it feels to be judged. It is not a good feeling. We need to stop judging and we need to work together and show love to each other.*

Si mis palabras tuvieran el poder de cambiar un corazón, dirían que nunca juzgues a nadie sin saber lo que están pasando. Nos burlamos unos de otros para nuestro disfrute y placer. ¿Por qué elegiría estas palabras? Porque sé cómo se siente ser juzgado. No es una buena sensación. Necesitamos dejar de juzgar y necesitamos trabajar juntos y mostrarnos amor mutuamente.

### **Kayleen Braswell**

*There should be more unity in the world. Everyone could get along if we don't judge each other, even if people are different from you. What unity means is that you give respect and show love because respect and love go a long way. So, what I am saying is "Let's stop judging and let's show love for the world because this can make our world (that one that I call home) a better place.*

Debería haber más unidad en el mundo. Todos podríamos llevarnos bien si no nos juzgáramos mutuamente, incluso si la gente es diferente a nosotros. Lo que significa la unidad es dar respeto y amor porque el respeto y el amor llegan muy lejos. Entonces, lo que estoy diciendo es "Dejemos de juzgar y mostremos amor por el mundo porque esto puede hacer de nuestro mundo (ese que llamo hogar) un lugar mejor".

# My Body is Here, But My Soul is Beyond There

Guadalupe Ortiz Telica

Uniondale High School

I was 8 years old; 'April 19, 2018' was a sunny day. I was returning home from school with my sister walking along that cobblestone road that we knew so well. I got ready to watch television and channel 12 was broadcasting live. It seemed strange to me to see people jumping over walls while others dispersed throughout the street, so I asked the girl who was taking care of us:

"Why are these people running from the police?" I asked innocently.

"A crisis has happened in the country, you are still small so you won't understand much about this," she replied.

I felt that everything was advancing around me while I didn't know what to do, my body was there from what I mostly remember, but at the same time I didn't feel it, it's like my soul was floating while I see what was happening;

Everything comes and goes but in my memory there will always be those mornings or 5am in which I woke up with my family and we were willing to help those in the neighborhood and ourselves, or also those nights in which the riot police or police shot or threw bombs while my mother helped heal the wounded, I remember going with my sister and her to a woman's house to make food for the others, there were pots and pots full of food since there were many injured people and people who had not eaten in all day for being on the front lines safeguarding our lives.

I thought it was something that could change, something that could be solved in a few months, or that the bad government would go away or change and that way we wouldn't suffer. My little self saw the way my parents were so brave, because despite everything we were going through, they never let me down and didn't leave my sister and me alone.

My mother is a teacher, of high courage, seriousness and security, with every unjust action she acted, actions that affected many people, that is why my sister and I have the reasoning, not as adults but as young people who seek the rights of people and their freedom.

I remember when the students got together, or those boys who helped us, different people, teachers, cleaning workers or grocery store workers, mothers, older people, wanted to raise their voices for their freedom, the freedom that was not allowed to them until today. , with their scarves, flags, barricades and weapons, they marched for the government that did not want to find a solution. If they did not do it, what would the future hold? Why should others suffer for the past?

I will never forget that Saturday, March 9, 2019, it will not be like a flash that comes and goes. I remember that morning when I asked my sister to borrow that pink blouse with a little dog on the front, a little big but comfortable for me, with those blue pants and my sneakers, my sister was ready and we prepared to grab our instrument called 'Lira '.

The school was close by so we knew the route by heart and we went there alone, in the band there were many boys and girls, of different ages, some played the drum, the girls the lyre, among them was my friend, that atmosphere it was my favorite since it was like getting away from everything else that was going on.

They told us to go inside the house that something had happened and that was when my intuition said that something bad happened and so it did, my two aunts were nervous and since my dad worked in that house it seemed strange to me not to see him.

That's when my aunt was sobbing and said to my sister and me:

“The riot police caught your dad and blamed him for something he didn't do. You have to stay here to be safe, with the things you have right now because the police also stole all the valuable things you have in the house.”

I thought about my mother, where was she? Could I go to her crying and ask her what had happened? She had always been with me, but not this time, this time she couldn't hug me saying that everything would be okay.

I will never forget those who gave their lives for their country, those who did not care about their physical health in order to save their beloved nation, and although to this day that Dictatorship has not gone away, I hope that one day the soul of those people can see that our Nicaragua will go towards freedom and will be unleashed, I will not forget my city, Masaya, the cradle of folklore and those moments that will not be erased from my memory and I will count on every opportunity I have for everything that happened and the power of words can completely change your life because if I was able to finally tell it and have someone listen to it then other people will too, and it will be worth it, since it is important to know all that happened, to know deeply the whole of it all.



# Mi travesia

Christopher Bares Alfaro  
Uniondale High School

In search of opportunity  
I introduce myself here  
For those who don't know me I usually call myself crispy with the c  
Now I'm almost a Mc  
I come to tell a story for you

I want to ask you a favor  
Let them respect the moment and pay attention  
Because there is an expedition  
that came from my heart

I was 13  
Son, a better future, you deserve it  
Dad told me, you're going with your brother, what do you think?  
I knew that the sadness of my dad and mom grows

I didn't want us to be far away  
I told him that we would give him a hand  
And that I was leaving because I didn't want him to be just my brother because I had never been  
separated from him.

Things got tense when they told me that truth  
It was very hard for everyone because we didn't want to separate.  
They wanted our futures better and that's why I'm not going to waste it.

And the walk began  
There were many moments and cold nights  
It was hard but destiny had prepared that for us.  
But with great courage we remained  
This is how we live

Well we crossed the first border  
And I say to my brother  
Ivan, every time we move my heart races. Spring had already passed, it was winter and we were still  
passing the quarries.

We were all migrating together, it was a side  
From people who came in taxis passing through all the streets of Mexico, moments when we were  
chatting then they said Immigration is looking for us  
And everyone in the group found us and walked away.

They arrested more than 5 people  
5 people and more who could not fulfill the American dream  
because the news arrived that they had been deported

At that moment I felt very terrified.  
Because if they caught both of us  
He was going to deport us back to El Salvador  
And I also wanted mom and dad to be better.

Well, thank God we arrived at immigration  
Another section and another situation  
We put our fingerprints and registered  
We called the family and told them with great emotion

The days passed  
A fucking immigration officer told me that nothing would come of it, as if he would care  
I didn't tell him anything and that anger would take me

In immigration we made many friends  
I was still thinking they were enemies  
But relax they were only other witnesses to the things that happened on their way

They said our Christopher and Iván  
Prepare yourselves because you're leaving now  
You're going to your house, home  
They told us they would give us clothes and how well they're going to treat us

What they said was right  
They gave us medical tests to see if we were sick  
I soon talked to a counselor and told her that I had been through a desert  
I thought it was a dream and I simply wanted to wake up

11 days had passed and we were going on our way  
For the first time I rode a plane and saw the scenery  
We saw this sunset that for me was a tribute  
Now I just had to make an effort to pay the fare

I arrived in New York and started studying.  
It was December when I decided to improvise  
From my room I started training  
I do it okay but I need much more



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# My Memories

Leslie Juarez Martinez

Uniondale High School

It's very surprising to see how life sometimes takes many twists and turns. Sometimes, I sit on my balcony and gaze at the sky, reminiscing about everything. I felt like I was on a big ball that had burst, and I tried to inflate it every day. One day, I asked myself a big question... Why am I so damaged?

I never thought that my greatest pain as an adult would be remembering my childhood. That stage that brings memories of family and melancholic moments to everyone. In my childhood, I was hurt a lot. I always wanted to see the bright side, but unfortunately, all I could remember were the voids they left in me. I would hear my heart shatter like a glass that falls and breaks into thousands of pieces. One day, I tried to piece it back together slowly, but it was impossible for me.

I rebuilt it with my mom, with her warm hugs. Yes, that was a good memory from my childhood. I never thought I would experience something like that. I only remember that day, and it makes me anxious. My soul fought against life and death. With just 13 years of age, I lived through my worst experience. I know that I was one more girl who had to endure domestic violence. Sadly, the person who hurt me was my father, the one who was supposed to protect me from all harm, the one who was supposed to help me not feel empty. But, unfortunately, I had a father with a different mentality, one who believed that violence solved problems.

I remember that date, 07/06/20, when my life depended on my father's hands, his strong hands with an inexplicable force. At that moment, I only thought about my mom and sister and how strong I had to be for them. Based on that date, that hot day with beautiful sunsets that I liked so much, my father was choking me and punching my face with a closed fist. I felt my body growing cold, and my heart no longer beat fast but slow. That big purple wall was stained with blood, dark blood. I remember when my father saw that I couldn't breathe anymore, he threw me to the floor and put his large, shirtless body on top of me, and he continued to beat me.

I only remember hearing in the background, "Die, you're a slut, I wish you were never born, you're not my daughter; you're a whore." In that moment, I felt that the words hurt me more than the heavy blows he was giving me. I have the sweet memory of hearing my sister in the background saying, "NENI," the way she used to call me. Her cries shattered me even more. My body was getting harder and colder with each passing moment, with my vision blurred and hearing an unfamiliar sound from a distance.



Since that day, something changed inside me. My inner child no longer existed. I just wanted that horrifying experience to leave my head. I fell heavily into drugs. I always said that marijuana took me out of the dumb reality I inhabited. I went to parties, did everything to feel better, but I wasn't. I was just a teenager asking for love and attention from my parents. When I received the opposite, rejection and indifference, I remember that despite everything I received from my parents, I created a "Leslie" with a different outlook on life. It never left my mind that I was just a girl who had suffered physical abuse. I just wanted a change in myself, and I achieved it. I only had to think about how strong they made me from that day. I changed so much that my goals are different now. I only think about succeeding and becoming a better person.

# A Glimmer of Hope

Keiry Fuentes

Uniondale High School

Last night, I couldn't sleep. My mind was racing, tangled in a web of worries and overthinking. As a high school student about to start my senior year, the weight of the past summer and the draining junior year loomed over me. The pandemic had taken its toll, leaving me feeling isolated, unmotivated, and struggling with my mental health.

Lying in bed, I gazed at the moonlight filtering through the window, illuminating my dark room. The hum of the air conditioner provided little comfort as I tossed and turned, growing increasingly frustrated and exhausted. The insomnia was relentless, refusing to grant me the rest I so desperately craved.

But as the night wore on, the darkness gradually gave way to the soft glow of dawn. The first rays of sunlight peeked through my window, stirring a glimmer of hope within me. The glimmer of hope that emerged within me was a spark of belief that things could get better. It was a tiny flame that flickered amidst the darkness, reminding me that even though I felt lost and overwhelmed I still had the power to take control of my life and seek the help I needed.

With the rising sun, a shift occurred within me. I realized that I couldn't continue on this path alone. I made a promise to myself to talk to my older sisters. As we sat together in our cozy living room, I mustered up the courage to make a heartfelt promise to my dear sisters. With tears in my eyes, I told them that I was committed to getting the help I needed. I promised them that I wouldn't keep my struggles to myself anymore. I would reach out to professionals who could guide me through my challenges and help me find my way back to happiness. I wanted them to know that seeking help wasn't a sign of weakness but a brave step towards feeling better. I expressed how much I loved and appreciated them, and how their unwavering support had given me hope. Their belief in

me inspired me to face my fears and embrace the unknown, knowing they would be there for me every step of the way. As I made this promise, the room filled with love, understanding, and compassion. It wasn't just words; it was a commitment to my own growth and to preserving our strong bond as sisters. In that moment, I felt a weight lifting from my shoulders. I knew that with their support, we would navigate this journey together, turning darkness into light, and finding comfort in our shared pursuit of healing and happiness.

This summer has been tough, no doubt about it. It forced me to confront my vulnerability and acknowledge my own struggles. But amidst the difficulties, I discovered a newfound strength, a resilience buried deep within. It revealed to me a path to healing and growth.

As I looked out at the gradually brightening sky, a sense of peace washed over me. The warmth of the sun's rays touched my skin, offering solace. At that moment, I whispered to myself, "I might be lost right now, but I'm not gone. And that's where my journey begins."

If my words had the power here, I would want to influence those who are also grappling with their own challenges, particularly young individuals navigating the complexities of school, mental health, and the impact of the pandemic. I would want to offer them solace, understanding, and a sense of hope. By sharing my story, I hope to let them know that they are not alone and that seeking support is a strength, not a weakness.



# Stand by Me

Rosena Petit Homme

Stony Brook University Student

I open my eyes and slowly close them, Allowing the darkness to submerge me in the brief moment of bliss. Away from the reality of my world and the news I just received. If only blinking took longer than a millisecond so I had enough time to reflect on this newly found information. Cancer is such a negative noun. It is usually correlated with an unavoidable painful death, something no one would ever want to experience. Though in my father's case he only had curable prostate cancer.

As Haitians, My family prioritized health. My parents made sure to keep us as fit as possible to ensure a happy life. That meant always attending doctor appointments, Morning stretches, herbal teas, and daily prayers. So many prayers. Anything that could be done to keep us healthy and alive. This news was like hearing that our methods had failed us. Our prayers were not heard and now we have to face the music.

"Mwen pa vle fè operasyon an. (*I don't want to do the surgery.*)" my father says.

"What do you mean you don't want to do the surgery?" I question.

"Se desizyon mwen, Rosena. Sispann. (*It's my decision, Rosena. Enough.*)" He says assertively, straightening his shoulders and Walking away. I turn around, ready to follow him into the next room but I'm stopped by a hand grabbing mine. I turned around to see that it was my mom who was preventing me from following my father.

"Li pè cheri. Li pa konnen kisa Operasyon an pral fè li. Pou kò li. (*He's scared honey. He doesn't know what the Surgery will do to him. To his body.*)"

"Li tande kèk moun ap pale. Li pè pou li mwens gason. (*He heard some people talking. He's scared of being less of a man. Afraid of what he'll lose with this prostate cancer. Afraid of telling people and having them think differently of him. He doesn't want to lose that. Losing that is like dying to him which is worse than letting this cancer take over.*)"

"Rosena, mwen bezwen di ou yon bagay. Yon bagay sou kansè an. (*Rosena, I need to tell you something. Something about the Cancer.*)" my father says several days later.

"mwen te toujou konnen. (*I've always known.*)" He looks down at his hands as if he's purposefully avoiding my eyes. "Papa m te genye l. Mwen te konnen li tap vini pou mwen. (*My dad had this. I knew it was coming to get me next.*)"

My Father continues, "I grew up in a small village and my dad did everything. If someone in the village needed help, he was the one to ask. He always gave. He was a giver. But he never took.

"Never took any help that could be given to someone else. Never took any criticism and feedback even when he probably should've. He was strong but he was stubborn. So stubborn." He says. He stops and glances up at me after what feels like an eternity.

"Maybe that's why I never knew about his illness. Maybe that's why he refused to tell me anything until the point where he couldn't hide it anymore. My father died at 55. He died the moment we needed him the most. The moment when we should've been the ones he needed for a chance. All his illnesses caught up to him and he couldn't keep himself up anymore.

"Burying my father was the hardest thing I had to do. I didn't know about the cancer until my mother told me just a few days later. All I could think about was if maybe I had known, maybe I could've prevented it. Maybe I could've helped him." He bows his wrinkled face as silence fills the room. The silence felt thick and for a second, I thought it would suffocate me.

I see my father. I hear the weakness in his voice—the pain and fear of what is to come. I've never met my grandfather but hearing my dad speak, We were transformed Into Haiti. We're standing side by side and I can see his father working on his farm. I can feel the heat from the sun beating against our skin, the dry air brushing against our faces. I can see his weak body hunched over yet still working hard since he doesn't have a choice. I can see him collapse from exhaustion and not getting up.

"Why have you never told us this?" I say looking up at him. In his eyes, I can see his fear. I could see his worry, his motivations, His hopes, and dreams and I knew I was in the wrong. I'm sinking into a hole and there's no way out. Who am I to feel the way I feel? Maybe his hole is 10 times bigger. Maybe his hole is completely covered and he's suffocating. I reach over and hug him. I've lived with him my entire life and I never realized how small he has gotten, how his thin, boney legs press into mine.

"It's ok," I whisper. "Thank you, Papa." He nods in response, a small smile emerging on his face. Maybe he didn't mean it and maybe he was still afraid of the thought but all I could think about was how he gave me a chance. He allowed me into his world and shared his fears and I knew I couldn't let him down.

After that moment, He eventually agreed to get his tumor removed. Maybe my persistence did help or maybe he decided all on his own. Maybe after getting everything off this chest, it allowed him to finally breathe. Being stuck in that hole was probably suffocating, as he slowly slipped in further the longer he carried his secrets and fears. I'm happy that he finally accepted our help and got out. Maybe he didn't want to share the heavy load, in fear of it only making us slip into our own hole, but ever since the moment he opened up, I've noticed how much happier he's gotten.

As I sit across from him in the hospital room, I notice the gleam in his eyes as he stares at my younger brothers. The wrinkles that used to sit on his face are nearly nonexistent and his hair has grown a couple of shades darker.

My father who always felt as though he was the last priority in our family is truly at the center. His pain was our pain and his story was ours as well. But no story truly ends and there will be more obstacles to overcome. Hopefully, this time we'll go through them together so that no one has to hold their pains to the point of collapsing from exhaustion. Hopefully, this time he won't feel as though he has to experience it alone.



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# Warrior's Blood

Hannah Solis

Stony Brook University Student

“Hannah, Emma, I need to tell you guys something.” My sister and I turn our bodies around to face our Aunt Noemi.

“My cancer is back.” After hearing that, I can see her lips moving, but I can't hear the words she's saying. All sounds became muffled. A ringing in my ear almost. Time stopped. My heart fell to my stomach.

Again? She has cancer again? But she was just declared free? Can she...can she beat it again?”

My auntie makes her way around the couch, our eyes following her, and sits next to us. “Don't worry. I beat it once. I can do it again. Will you pray with me?” She reaches her hands towards us. I take her hand and my sister's. “Let's pray.”

I can feel my eyes start to water, but I tell myself to hold them back. “I have to be strong.” I open my eyes after praying, and I give my auntie a big hug, “Te quiero mucho” I say quietly. I don't really know Spanish, but I do know how to say I love you. Those were the first Spanish words I learned from my family.

“Yo Tambien”, my aunt tells me as she continues to hold my hands and smiles at me brightly. She is a warrior. It seems to run in the family.\*

“Hannah, it's time to pray,” my aunt tells me quietly while reaching her hand out. I take her hand as she leads me to the altar. She gets on her knees and looks back at me, mouthing the words, “Come, like me”. I looked around the room because my mind was convinced that others were watching me. “But Auntie, I don't know how to pray.” “It's okay, I'll teach you.” my auntie pats the ground next to her. I slowly sit on the ground and adjust myself to mimic her stance. “Repeat after me.” She closes her eyes. She slightly squints one of her eyes open to check that I was following what she was doing. “Close your eyes. Now, we start with Heavenly father” I repeat after her. “Then we say what we are grateful for and what we need. You try.” As a seven-year-old would pray for, I thanked God for my family, for food, for everything. I prayed that I could have ice cream after church and that we could go to Disneyland. I guess a seven-year-old didn't have much to worry about, “Amen.”

I get on my knees. Except this time, I don't naively pray for things like ice cream or Disneyland. My prayers don't sound very articulately with big, old-fashioned words. In my prayer, I simply plead with God to make my Auntie healthy again. “My Aunt has cancer again. Everyone says

she is strong, and I know she is, but she is also human. So please, make her healthy again.”

My Aunt was born in Acapulco, Guerrero, Mexico. My auntie became a school teacher, she worked with special children. It's not easy to become a school teacher. She was proud of her accomplishment. I could tell, from the way she tells me stories of when she was a teacher, I see a mix of emotions that stir within her. Her excitable expression of when she was in front of the class teaching. As she finishes her story, her expression fills with sadness, feeling nostalgia from when she used to be a teacher. She married and had her three children, all now adults with their own beautiful families. She must've felt she was living happily ever after. But her dreams were shattered.

To be honest, I don't know much about her past in Mexico, stories not meant for a child's ears, maybe. As I got older, I came to know one of the main reasons she came to America was to escape her abusive husband. He beat her. I don't know much about him, just that he was not a good person. Black and blue and in pain. The monster of the man who preyed on her because she was weaker than him. It was hard for her to get away from him. We often hear domestic violence survivors stories. People's responses are always, “Why didn't they leave?” Little do they know there is so much more to their stories. The way fear freezes us as an attempt to protect us. How love makes us stay just a little longer. How hope robs us of the reality of our situations. How she hid her bruises from the world, so she could continue the image of a happy wife who has everything; everyone else envies.

With every hit her hope to return to how it once was, leaving, wincing on the floor, she made up her mind, she took her children and ran. Ran away from the monster and kept running until they were safe. She ran with her children until they reached America. She came to America for safety and a new start.

However, she couldn't keep being a school teacher since she wasn't a U.S. citizen, but she became a house cleaner, to supply for her children. To give them a life filled with American dreams and opportunities. I can't imagine the sorrow she must have felt from living in comfort to being scared every night to having your dreams taken away from you. From living in luxury to living in the projects in LA. My auntie was living happily ever after, but not like the ones in fairy tales. There was no knight in shining armor that came, saved her from the villain, and everyone lived happily ever after. No, she had to put on the armor herself and fight for her own happily ever after. Now, she's a grandmother. But I don't understand why now she has to have cancer. Why her? Not once, but twice?

Fighting...surviving...must be in my family's blood. We have warrior blood.





# Shape of My Heart

By Renata Anqa

Supervisor of ENL and World Languages  
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The warning bell rang as my high school students kept trickling into my classroom. As always, I stood by the door watching them approach, so I can gauge their mood by observing their faces and the way they walk. Are they in a group engaged in a lively discussion? Or walking alone slowly with their earphones in as they keep their gaze upon a wave of students whose pace they follow as they go to their next period?

Exchanging “Good Mornings”, “Buenos días”, “Holas”, smiles, and ‘cool’ fist bumps (yeah, my boys were cool like that!), and glancing at the classroom as they all settle in their seats, my attention quickly shifts toward Sandra among a very few students who are hurriedly catching up with the major wave in the now almost empty hallway, walking alone s l o w l y toward me, with her head down and face hidden by her long stringy hair.

The main bell rang, yet her pace didn’t pick up, as though she didn’t hear it, or its significance as a marker of the beginning of the period didn’t even matter at all. To get her attention so I can take a look at her eyes, I attempted to make a conversation. “Buenos días. Tú eres tarde hoy,” (You are late today) I said gently in my beginner Spanish to this recent newcomer, an unaccompanied minor from Central America, who had no family here and lived with an assigned guardian. My greeting was met with silence.

Instead of eye contact or a spoken response, I found myself in Sandra’s tight embrace. As I hugged her I felt her body shake, and as the main bell silenced, I heard her sobbing aloud. We stood frozen in that moment for what felt like a lifetime. “¿Qué pasa?” (What’s wrong?), I asked. Looking down at her shoes she’s been wearing every day since she started school, she uttered in a broken voice, “Ms.... Tengo hambre.” (I am hungry.)

As thousands of thoughts and memories flashed through my mind, I signaled my Teacher’s Assistant to come over and asked her to take Sandra to the cafeteria, and then to her guidance counselor. As they walked away, with my emotions running high, I looked down and realized that my shirt was soaking wet as though tears from my heart broke a dam I worked so hard to build ever since I was a civil war refugee hungry on the

streets of a first-world country whose language I didn't know, and couldn't express my lonely broken heart that just wouldn't stop crying.

Then, acutely becoming aware of my surroundings, I looked up at the classroom filled with 24 unaccompanied minors from Central America looking at me looking at the heart-shaped wet spot on my shirt in a deafening silence.



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