



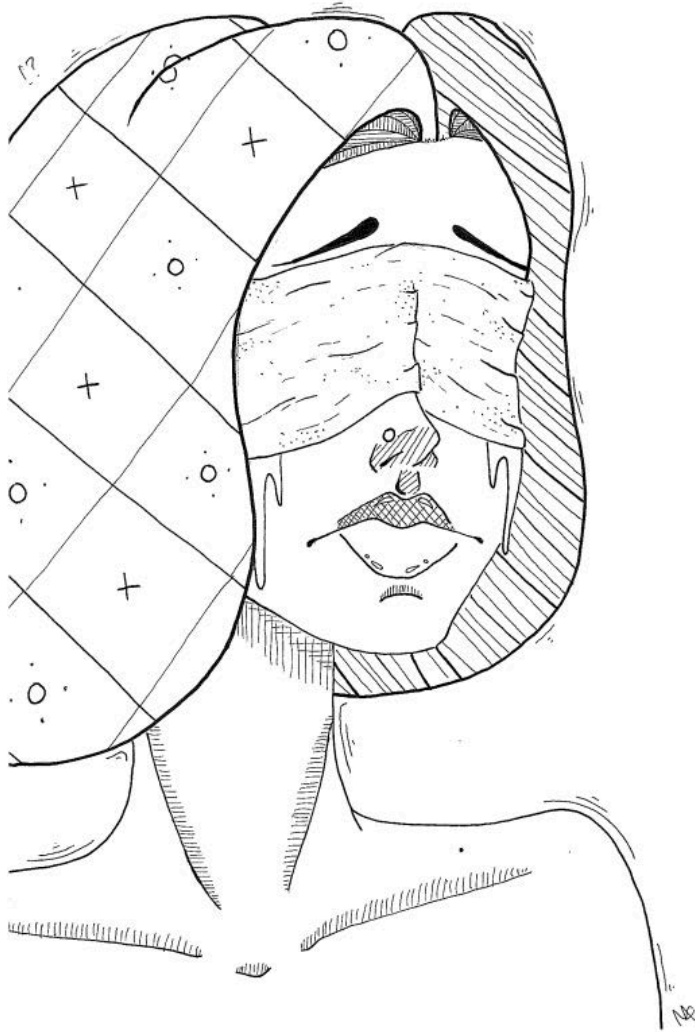
CENTER FOR
**Improving
Youth Justice**



Pencil & Palette
Creative Contest

2024 Winners

Center for Improving Youth Justice Pencil & Palette Creative Contest Drawing Winner: Jacob



Strength Through Struggle

I've been at the same correctional facility for three years now and I've constantly been

drawing. My pain is in these pieces of art and that is what gives them value no matter how good or how bad they are. I used to draw only knives, nooses, and whatever else was sad. That changed, because people challenged me to be better. Now I'm going to pursue a living in tattooing once I'm free of these walls. Drawing is what got me through some of my worst days and it'll soon bring me some of my best days.

The blindfold represents the pain I hide in my work. The tears represent the emotions I felt. The shakiness represents my anxiety. The hair represents my OCD and my need for order. My art is my strength and my gift I bring to you. I have one of the greatest strengths I could ever think of. My art will carry me through struggle onto a better future. I never been good looking, so my art will take my place. I'm finding hope and that's how this drawing relates. I'm seeing a future where I can be something, because of my art. All this struggle means something now I know where I need to go.

Center for Improving Youth Justice

Pencil & Palette Creative Contest

Short Story Winner: Makenzie

Giving birth to a child doesn't actually make you a mother. Family is about so much more than blood. True motherhood all comes down to a choice. It's the choice to change diapers and wipe runny noses and teach them to count. It's the choice to dive into the things that have no glory. It's not easy. But it's worth it. With that distinction made, I can honestly say that I may have never given birth, but I was a mother. I was nowhere near old enough at a mere nine years, but I wouldn't change it. I didn't see the wings or the halo until it was too late, but they were there. The tragic thing about loving an angel, though, is that they were never really meant to be here. So, they don't stay. He calls their name, and they fly Home. Mine was no exception.

My little girl was twenty-seven months younger than I was but when my grandmother passed away and left us with an alcoholic who didn't live in reality I was thrust into a role I didn't particularly want. My title shifted from "sister" to "mother". Instead of taking baths with her I tried to force her into them. I couldn't complain about homework because I had to make sure she did hers. I no longer stayed awake giggling; I coaxed her into bed for school the next day. My grandmother was still alive when she started school, but she worked too many shifts to take her to her first day. So, I took her. She latched onto my hand as we went up the stairs of the bus and didn't let me go for almost an hour. I took her to my classroom first so she would know where to find me and then took her down the hall to the teacher I'd had two years prior. And then I had to take my hand from her. I didn't like it then and it tore my world apart when that little hand was ripped away from me seven years later.

My grandma was still alive when my sister was learning to walk but she worked so often that I taught her. I took hold of her hand early on and I never let her go. I taught her to count and read and tie her shoes. I dried her tears, kissed her scrapes, fussed over her fevers. I was out of my classroom and down the hall instantly if she needed me. Eventually I got the opportunity to step out of the mother role. But motherhood is forever. Once you're in you're in forever. If they're your baby once they're your baby forever. So, I talked her through her first crush, had the very awkward the-birds-and-the-bees talk and went half crazy dealing with teen angst she wasn't old enough to have. The thing about my precious little angel and I was that everyone left us. She lived a little over 12 years. She got a total of 4,417 days. I am the only person who never missed one. I was all she had. I was her favorite person. I was all she could count on, so I made myself worthy of that

trust. I couldn't have stepped out of the mother role even if I wanted to. She needed me. Until she didn't.

I've lost enough people to know that it always cuts. But take my word for it when I say that nothing will cut you like losing a child that you raised. It's strange that the days that change our lives start out so ordinary, but it was that way for me. You very rarely know that your entire life is about to change. I certainly didn't. I guess when you watch everyone leave you learn to do it, too. And she did. I walked outside in the rain to put our younger sisters' bikes in the shed. It was just a typical rainy July Thursday. Until it wasn't. Until I saw her body hanging from a tree and screamed as my world shattered. And suddenly we were *those* people. We were emergency lights illuminating the whole block. We were huddled together in tears on the front lawn. We were an obituary with a 6th grade school photo bearing our names under hers. We went from your average family next door to the headline people read and say, "Thank God it wasn't us". She was kept alive by machines for four days. But she was gone. Her boundless energy had dissipated. The stars in her eyes went out. The sunlight in her smile vanished. The music in her laughter was cut short. Her story stopped mid-chapter, tear stained and painful. The little hand I'd held all my life was ripped away from me. Before I could really comprehend what was happening my baby girl was nothing more than a few pounds of ashes. For her, it was over. But for me it was only beginning.

There aren't many people left who can attest to what I was like in the months after her loss, and none who I was close with. But I'm not so conceited that I can't tell you I was horrible. Now I am so full of life and light and love. I am a giggly little chatterbox who uplifts and lights every life I manage to touch. But, I was a nightmare. I survived the first months without her on anger. Anger at the world. Anger at the ones who signed off on unplugging her. Anger at every idiot who got to live when she didn't. I was all venom, cruelty and words like knives. Every little spark lit my fuse and when I exploded, I left no one around me uninjured. I never inflicted physical harm. I didn't need to. My whole life I watched people weaponize words, so it was easy for me to learn to do it. I was *mad*. Mad, mad, mad at everything and everyone and it showed. But then I burned myself out. I wasn't mad anymore. I was in more pain than most people can comprehend. And *that* was a whole different ballgame.

When I was young, I was such a tough little girl. Even in the year before her death I was Little Miss Tough Girl. But she broke every conception I had of me and who that person was. Any little thing could send me into tears. I cut the pain out on my skin. My sleeping pills were on such a high dosage that I got a few hours every night of complete numbness where I did not feel. My wound just wouldn't scar. Not inside. It was opened again every time her loss hit me again. I was bleeding out slowly but surely. The broken mess of a heart in my chest was killing me just as surely as the tumors had killed my grandmother and given me the privilege of being that little girl's mother. When my baby girl died, I thought I would never be okay again. But I was wrong.

I didn't get *over* losing her. I just got through it. It was an uphill battle, but I was born a fighter. When I say it took years I'm not exaggerating. But one day I caught myself smiling. Out of nowhere I re-learned the sound of my laughter. I wasn't out of the woods yet. But I was getting there. If you catch me on a bad day I might still tell you that time does not make it better. But it does. It's a band-aid not a cure. It'll cover it up and protect the wound. But when the band-aid is ripped off the wound is still raw and bleeding. Losing my little girl is the best and worst thing that ever happened to me. There's no doubt that it shattered me. But God couldn't put me back together if I didn't break first.

She's been gone for 37 months now. Just over 3 years. And it was only recently that I felt true joy again. Watching her lose her life so young taught me the value of mine. Not everyone gets the chance to live so I won't waste mine. She taught me to laugh when it's funny, light the darkness, say yes when you want to say no. Jump in and *live*. Not every moment can be happy, but I choose to find joy where I can. When my strength falters, I turn back to her. I don't say it aloud, but I ask her a lot if she's watching. I do it for her. To do what she can't and make her proud. I lost my baby, and I thought it would kill me. But in the end it gave me the freedom to live. Sometimes I still cry. But a day never passes when I don't smile at least once. And I can thank her for that.

Center for Improving Youth Justice
Pencil & Palette Creative Contest
Poetry Winner: Raeliannah

To be a kid.

I remember what it was like to be a kid,
Oh to be that way again.

My hair,
My eyes,
My smile,
My chest,
My hands,
My stomach,
My hips,
My thighs,
My feet.

These were all the things I used to like as a kid, I now despise as a teen. Growing up playing tag with the boys, unaware that soon it wouldn't be a game anymore. That soon they would take advantage of my innocence, they would make me hate the body I used to love so much.

I remember what it was like to be a kid,
Oh to be that way again.

Growing up I put all my trust in men, not knowing how dangerous the world had become, not knowing that as a teen my trust and boundaries would be walked all over. That my confidence would continue to disappear, that all the things I used to love would disappear too. I decided I should put my trust in women, hoping things would be much different, but they hurt me too, not physically but by not believing when I said I was hurting.

I remember what it was like to be a kid,
oh to be that way again.

So small and young,
smart and bold,
naïve and brave.

All good things people used to say, all good things i
used to believe, all good things that used to make
me feel safe.

So small and young,
scared and alone,
worried and cold,
all bad things i now feel.

I remember what it was like to be a kid,
oh to be that way again.

Growing up i had one good friend, that friend
was everything to me. Sadly this terrible world
took her from me.

The pain.

The hurt.

The grief.

The guilt.

The shame.

The sadness.

The anger.

The tears that won't fall, these were all the things
that took over my body, over my mind.

I remember what it was like to be a kid, oh
to be that way again.

This life has dealt me cards that have come to dislike me, but I won't let them change me. I've gone through hell and back, now I'm standing stronger and taller than before.

I remember what it was like to be a kid, now it's time to grow up, repair my heart, & trust.

Reflect on how your experiences have shaped who you are. What does it mean to you to be able to share your story?

As the poem states I have had a very rough life from home to home in the system, to getting adopted and having a pretty terrible experience. To realizing I can't stay a kid forever eventually I have to grow-up and work on loving myself and my repairing the relationships I've built along the way.