

Best Friends for Life

Mike Ethier

Armstrong High School, grade 11

"Where's that kid?" The tough little hooligan on his Big Wheel wanted to play with me. Thus, at age four, our unlikely friendship began. My mom thinks our friendship is very unusual, as in many ways Andrew and I are very different people. Andrew has a severe case of Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). At a young age he was the terror of the neighborhood and the outcast at school. Yet we became good friends, and now I don't know what I would do without him.

Andrew had had a hard life, starting when he was a baby born to a teenage couple, at least one of whom abused drugs. This may have contributed to his ADHD and learning disabilities. He was given up for adoption before the age of one. He was wild even then, causing great concern for his adopted parents. When he was two, they got a divorce, possibly because of the stress he put on their marriage. He has lived with his mom ever since, but fortunately he keeps in fairly close contact with his dad.

When he was young, his mom bore the brunt of his behavioral problems, and essentially couldn't control him. Consequently, he would roam up and down the neighborhood on his Big Wheel at will. When I first got to know him at age four, I was fascinated but somewhat afraid of him. He was big, wild, and strong for a four-year-old, but what mattered to me was that we had fun together. We both enjoyed playing in the sandbox and riding our Big Wheels, so we became friends.

Although I do not remember many specifics of our friendship at that young age, my mom tells me it presented problems. While I liked Andrew and he liked me, he was out of control. He had no respect for authority. If my mom asked him to do something, he would just flat out ignore her, or get very mad. In first grade he tried to back his mom's car out of the driveway, much to the alarm of the neighborhood adults, and he had the habit of breaking windows in all the houses in the neighborhood by haphazardly throwing rocks or hitting golf balls. On occasion he would wander into someone's garage, and if he saw something that caught his eye, he would take it home to play with it. My mom even called a child psychologist to ask if our friendship was a bad idea. In spite of these problems, I always liked Andrew, and I didn't even care about his wild side, or realize he was ostracized at school as a "retard" and a "loser."

On the surface, Andrew and I seemed totally different. I was the bright young kid, reading voraciously as soon as I could, and being especially interested in topics such as history. I would browse the encyclopedia as a young child, fascinated with what I read. Even now school comes very easy to me, and I have high ambitions for the future. Andrew was the total opposite. He struggled with school and reads at a second grade level to this day. He had no respect for authority, and was very physical at a young age, always kicking, throwing, shoving, and hitting (usually objects and not people). I'm sure his mother spent many sleepless nights worrying about him.

What started off as playing in the sandbox quickly grew to bigger things as we got older. We shared many common interests, and we spent many happy hours riding our bikes off jumps in the street, building and launching model rockets, and building a clubhouse in his garage. Andrew was unable to participate in sports like I was, because he couldn't grasp the team concept. I still remember his one attempt at soccer in first grade. A kid on the other team was making a dash toward the goal, and Andrew, who was twice the size and strength of anyone else, simply knocked the kid flat on his back rather than go for the ball. That's the kind of kid he was. But when we were together, we got along great. Throughout the years, we spent huge amounts of time together, so much that my mom would have to get after me to see my other friends. Today we still do many things together, such as skiing in Colorado, swimming at our cabins, playing Nintendo at his house, or running a lawn mowing service in our neighborhood during the summer.

We have been through hard times. Andrew and I never went to the same school, since I attended a Catholic grade school, and then enrolled in the public schools, while Andrew was removed from the public schools and placed in a private school for children with learning disabilities. I feel bad now, but when I was younger I would sometimes take advantage of the monopoly I had on his friendship. When a school friend of mine wanted to get together, I would, even if it meant brushing off Andrew. I knew he had no other friends, so he would still be there when I got back. This was incredibly selfish and downright mean of me, and I feel absolutely terrible for thinking that way.

A particularly traumatic event in our friendship occurred two summers ago, when we were fifteen. Andrew has an adjustable, movable basketball hoop, and we had been shooting baskets all day. We had the hoop at its highest setting, and we had to tip it over to lower it, since it got stuck. I tipped it over and Andrew tried to adjust it, when suddenly the backboard crashed down, crushing Andrew's fingers in the adjusting mechanism.

In the same instant, it slipped out of my hands so Andrew was lifted in the air by his crushed fingers. When he got his fingers loose, they were a bloody, mangled mess, and he had to be rushed to the hospital. After emergency surgery in the middle of the night, he was put on strong painkillers, and spent much of the summer with his arm immobilized. I felt horrible as I had ruined the summer for him, but what really frightened me was that I may have hurt his ability to make a living because I knew he needed his hands to be the mechanic he hoped to become. Fortunately, he had one finger reattached and just lost the tip of the other, and he made it very clear to me that it was an accident that could happen to anyone so I shouldn't feel bad.

Andrew has the vulnerability and heart of a little kid. Up until very recently he always would call our house as soon as he got home from school, announcing to my mom, "Hi, Linda, I'm home now." His mom didn't make him do this, he just wanted us to know he was there. Andrew acts like a little kid around our feisty terrier Wally. The dog really likes Andrew (it must be something about the way he smells) but Andrew is afraid to pet him, despite how much he would like to. He reaches down to touch Wally, but keeps getting scared and draws back. It is also not unusual for me to head over to his house in the summer, only to discover him in his backyard hurling rocks across the lengths of two neighboring yards into a small pond. We have gone camping in the Boundary Waters with a YMCA camp on a number of occasions, and Andrew, in addition to gaining a reputation as the strongest kid in the group, is always the one who starts throwing rocks as soon as he gets into a campsite.

Andrew also has retained the physical invincibility of a small child. I clearly remember him up in the Boundary Waters, tripping over a canoe on the ground, toppling backwards into it, and smashing his head on the side. While this fall would have knocked most people out cold, Andrew just groaned a little and got up. He has the resilient heart of a kid to this day.

Our friendship has been very special, and we have helped each other in many ways. Andrew is very suggestible, and could easily end up with the wrong crowd. I have done my best to guide him over the years, which hasn't been too hard as he imitates everything I do. I received my first pair of glasses in first grade, and Andrew insisted on getting some too, even though he didn't need them. He made it a point to get the exact same style I had. Hopefully the influence I have had on Andrew will make him a better person. I *know* I will be a better person because of our friendship. When I see kids getting teased or just looked down upon because they have a learning disability, I think of how that could be Andrew, and how there probably have been occasions when that *was* Andrew. I have seen what those kids have to offer, through knowing

Andrew, and it's just as much, if not more than what the rest of us have to offer. Just watching him work hard to overcome his challenges inspires me to try harder. And knowing him gives me an open-mindedness toward all people.

Andrew and I have been friends for a long time, and probably will remain so our entire lives. Even though we are both growing up, as we now have girlfriends and are looking to a future where we may go different ways, we will always be best friends. We are like brothers, only we have more fun together. We are best friends for life.

Always Cool

Me and my best friend
 We have our own style
 Always have, always will
 If u know us, u'll never 4get.
 Our crazy personalitiez
 The ditz mentality
 Our valleygirl accentz
 Will amaze u and
 If u don't agree
 With our lifestyle
 Ur not worth our time
 But if u do u'll truly
 Know what fun iz
 Cuz we're da cooles MSMz
 So learn the rulz
 Live our gamz
 And Luv US. . .
 Ana and Magz
 Best friendz 4eva
 DUH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Ana Pitigoi

Kennedy High School, grade 10

Mike's Reflection:

I wrote this paper specifically for this writing award. The essay was never an assignment, and my teacher never saw it. It is not necessarily something I would have wanted passed around the class or shared in a small group anyway, as that is what frequently happens with classroom assignments. Fortunately, it was extremely easy to write, as it was a subject very near and dear to me.

While it is an uncomfortable subject and not one I would share with many people, writing the paper was simple. And it will definitely be a paper I can look back on for the rest of my life, and have the memories come flooding back.

Coming Home to Myself

Joshua Helmin

Hopkins High School, grade 11

The dock that stretched out over the lake was faintly brown and chipped everywhere. We sat on the end of the dock, our bare feet swishing around in the freezing water. Tiny fish darted and meandered around our feet and a cool breeze crept over us. I zipped up my sweatshirt and wrapped my arm around Evelyn. The playfulness and perfection of the moment was betrayed by the extremely serious conversation we were having.

"Are you going to say it?"

"Say what?" I asked, pretending to be naive.

Evelyn grunted impatiently. "Josh, you've been writing about it, you've been talking about it – but you've never directly said it. It's been just below the surface in our relationship for over ten months now."

I looked at my hands for a moment. I lifted my gaze to hers as tears began to well up in her eyes. She sniffled quietly and, with a hint of frustration, brushed a strand of hair out of her face. The sounds of distant sea gulls squawking and bantering intruded upon the unyielding silence.

"I've never said it aloud," I confessed.

"I know," she said, her bottom lip quivering. "I know."

I was surprised when tears came into my own eyes. It seemed a heavy, constricting weight had formed in the back of my throat, inhibiting my ability to speak.

"Josh, I've been your girlfriend for almost five years now. I know you really, really well." She paused briefly, and I could tell from the look on her face that she was choosing her words carefully. "Josh, I won't love you any less. It'll be different, but I'll always be here."

A tear slipped down my cheek. I took a deep breath and made direct eye contact with her.

"I'm gay," I said flatly.

The words stunned me. I felt a mixture of shock, horror, and elation all at once. I felt liberated and empowered and yet terrified. I had never spoken those words in my entire life.

I tried it again.

"I'm gay," I said a little louder. I paused and refocused my mind. "Yeah, I'm gay," I said with a dash of confidence.

She smiled at me with tears running down her face. When she hugged me, she clung to me as if it was the last time she was ever going to see me. "There you go," she whispered. "I knew you could do it." At last I had confided my awakening feelings to her, and sadly my confession ended our five year relationship indefinitely.

I silently thanked God. I wasn't exactly sure what I was thankful for, but I thanked God wholeheartedly anyway. At the age of fifteen, the longest, hardest, and most fulfilling journey of my life began.

A few days later I found myself walking through the cold metal turnstiles of the public library. I had told my mother that I was working on an honors biology project and had even brought my textbook into the library as a prop. I felt like a secret agent, slyly avoiding the enemy and making everyone think I was an unsuspecting passerby, instead of a man with a mission.

With furtive glances in all directions I stepped up to one of the computer terminals. I placed the biology textbook next to me so anybody coming remotely near me would think perhaps I was working on a science fair project or a mid-term paper. I was careful to place my body directly in front of the screen before I typed in the word "gay," and pressed the return key. The computer began whirring, and suddenly dozens of titles were spinning before my eyes. I feverishly wrote down the numbers plastered on the screen and scuttled off into the shelves of books.

I felt I was going on a treasure hunt that would let me know who I was. I worked my way around much of the library, gathering at least a dozen books. I clutched the books in my arms, holding them so the titles were covered. I made my way to a private corner of the library where I devoured all of the sacred information. I read about the hundreds of people throughout history like Michelangelo, Alexander the Great, and Walt Whitman who were gay and had positively impacted the world. I read about intelligent activists who showed me how ridiculous and frivolous homophobia was. I read gay people need to first overcome all their fears and prejudices about gay people – something the authors called internalized homophobia – so gay people can learn to accept themselves. I also read that gay people need to know themselves thoroughly and be centered so they can deal with all the opposition they may face in life. With my voracious hunger for knowledge not yet satisfied, I consumed a book of essays by gay teens. They told stories of how their parents reacted to finding out their children were gay and how their friends and schoolmates reacted. Of equal interest to me were stories about the trials and tribulations of young, forbidden love as told by the young gay authors.

My head was spinning. It was becoming quite clear to me that nothing was wrong with being gay. For me, being gay was the most natural thing in the world. It felt right. I had always believed love was beautiful no matter what form it took. I was sure that God sanctified all love.

I felt more and more comfortable as I said the words "I'm gay." I practiced them in front of the mirror in my bedroom. I wrote about being gay in my journal and read about being gay in books. I felt validated and confirmed as a human being. I had a deep sense within myself that I was on my way to becoming a *whole* person.

I started doing wonderful things for myself. I started running three miles every other day, lifting weights, and kick-boxing. I concentrated on healthy eating, good sleep patterns, and making academics the shining star of my life. I felt invincible. Sheer happiness and euphoria spilled over into my daily life. People began asking what had changed and I would hesitate and say, "Well, nothing big."

I had become completely truthful and honest with myself but still hadn't told anyone I was gay. During one particularly grueling kick-boxing routine I began thinking about telling people I was gay. I rushed home after the class was finished with a sense of urgency.

I began examining my own fears. I opened a notebook and started writing. I wrote, "To come out or not to come out. That is the question. . . I've been chewing and debating on this for a long time. Now things are intensifying. For example, Aurélian is trying to set me up with so many different girls and he can't understand why I'm not interested in them. I don't like it here in the closet, but it seems much safer here. . . Well, I've got to get out of the safety zone. Deep down I am scared of violence and continued harassment. Those aren't paranoid, absurd fears. I'm afraid of being called "faggot" in the halls, of having my teachers and classmates treat me differently. I am afraid of not having a response for all the haters. I can't imagine sitting in an English or science class and having all the people know I'm gay. But, it has to happen sometime I guess. Maybe I should wait for junior year. . . But what if I get to junior year and then say I'll wait for senior year? Then what? I can't be pure me unless I'm truthful about who I am. I pledge to myself that I will come out soon. Maybe not tomorrow, but soon."

With that manifesto written, I challenged myself further and slowly started to gently nudge myself out of the closet. I started to family and friends the truth, but each time I started to really say what I meant, a knot seemed to tighten in my stomach. But it didn't take me much longer before I started to tell people the truth.

I picked up the phone. I hung it up again. I picked it up, dialed five digits, and then hung it up again. I sighed. Briefly I wondered if I was insane. Didn't gay people get rejected by their friends and family? Didn't they get spit on and pushed in the halls and get called "queer bastards?" I told my fears to shut up and again picked up the receiver.

I called my best friend Ariel first.

"You're gay?" she asked, sounding giddy. "You know, I wondered about that. So who do you think is cute in our school?"

Her reaction shocked me. She came from a respectable, wealthy Jewish family. For some reason I thought her wealth and religion would have an effect on her response to gay people. I always assumed maybe she would be judgmental or cold about the whole gay topic. The truth was she didn't think it was a big deal at all.

When Ariel and I finished talking, I decided to call another close friend.

"You're *gay*?" Alisha asked incredulously. Then she laughed and sounded relieved. "Josh, I've been in love with you for *two years* and I've always wondered why you never responded to my flirtations or the trail of hints I left you. I thought maybe I wasn't cute enough or maybe. . . I don't know." She laughed again. "I feel a lot better now." Suddenly her voice became quiet and she seemed very concerned. "Josh, are you okay with this? I mean, you're not depressed or anything, are you?" I laughed and assured her that I was definitely fine.

I worked through my entire speed dial list of twenty people that Sunday afternoon. Nobody hung up on me, nobody called me names, and nobody rejected me. Instead I was met with people who were thankful I trusted them and cared enough about them to be truthful and honest. Many of them had a slew of questions which they asked and I answered to the best of my ability.

When I opened the door to my house, I could hear the phone ringing. I tossed down my backpack, peeled off my shoes, and frantically ran for the phone.

"Hello?" I said, trying to sound calm and composed.

"Hi, Joshua, it's Grandpa."

"Oh, hi, Grandpa!"

"I got your message and called you back right away. Sounded like you wanted to talk."

For a moment I balked.

"Well, I wanted to tell you something."

"I've got all the time in the world," he said patiently. It might take that long, I thought to myself.

"Well. . . do you remember Evelyn, my girlfriend?"

"Is she the blond that makes the good angelfood cake?"

"Yeah, yeah that's her," I said quickly. "And uhm, we broke up not too long ago."

"Why?" Grandpa inquired compassionately.

"Well, grandpa. . . I, uhm. . . like boys." Then I bravely added, "I mean, I like boys and not girls." There was a deafening silence from the other end.

"You mean you're gay?" Grandpa asked gently. I didn't even know he knew what the word "gay" meant.

"Yeah. I am."

He sighed. "Well, I don't know if being gay is a sin, but why don't you ask Jesus' forgiveness just in case. God forgives all sins, you know. Jesus always loved the down-trodden. He always was with the lepers and poor and tried to give them hope."

My heart was soaring. My grandfather, one of the most devout Roman Catholics walking the face of the earth, had just said it was okay I was gay. He had accepted me. I thought the hardest battle had just been forged.

I was very, very wrong about that.

I told my parents during dinner. My mother stopped eating and looked like she had choked on her mashed potatoes. My father just looked confused.

"Josh, there are many teenagers who get confused and explore things."

"I know, Mom, but this isn't just a phase that can be dismissed. I've been dealing with this for over a year now. They're pretty strong feelings, too."

Mom looked like she was going to lose her dinner. She looked pale and depressed. I felt a surge of guilt as I saw the pained, sad expression on her face. "Well, I wonder what happened," she said pensively. She listed off events and things and people she thought could have "made me" gay.

"Mom, being gay isn't *caused* by something. It's something innate. Nobody can make a straight person gay and nobody can make a gay person straight. People are who they are." I went on to educate my parents with all the information I'd gathered over the past months.

"Josh, you're too young to know you're gay," my mother said frantically.

"Really? Okay, take my friend Kenny for example. He's been with his girlfriend Melissa for almost a year. Is he too young to know that he's straight?" My mother had

nothing to say to that and instead changed the subject.

"There's nurture and there's nature," my mother stated. "Josh, I don't believe you're gay. You were with Evelyn for – what, five years? – and I know you *loved* her. Josh, you don't have to be gay."

"Mom. . . Dad. . . Don't you understand what I'm saying? It takes some serious guts to sit here and bare my soul to you. I don't want to lie, I don't want to pretend. I want you to know who I am." I started rambling. "If I'm gay or straight or if I want to be an architect or an actor or if I want to live in Africa or Arkansas, I'll still love you and you'll still love me. Isn't that the way it works?"

"Joshua, I'll always love you. I just don't want to deal with this." She got up from the table and cleaned her plate. The plate clattered noisily in the sink as she left the room.

My parents weren't behind me. They didn't understand that I could never be happy and contented with a girl. They later went on to make it quite clear I wouldn't be allowed to date or have gay friends while I lived under their roof. My parents and I had always been very close, and I felt very hurt by their adverse reaction. When my mom and I went on car trips, we would blast the radio and sing at the top of our lungs. My mom and I would sit on the couch and have elaborate discussions about college and my future for hours on end. My dad and I would sit and watch the Vikings games and talk about things that were bothering me during the commercials.

I responded to their negative reaction by moping around the house and school. I was angry, sad, and bitter. After a week of that unstable, disgusting emotional mix, I decided to put their reaction behind me as much as possible. I would always love my parents and they would always love me, but perhaps some issues existed which we could not work through. My strength was momentarily shaken, but I moved on to more important things.

My newly discovered inner strength and confidence kept my life moving. I continued to visit the library under the guise of needing to do research or study. From reading books I learned how to deal with homophobic people and learned how to function as a gay person in a straight world. Through all of this new education and self-care I had found contentment within myself.

At the end of my sophomore year I decided to take all of my courage and "out" myself to my school. I told my

favorite teachers I was gay. All of them responded positively and many said they would be available to talk with me, day or night, if I needed to talk with someone.

One of my teachers even suggested I join PROUD, the school's Gay/Straight Alliance. I joined and soon became one of the most active members. During one meeting we decided we should have speakers go around to different classes to talk about being gay. I volunteered to be a speaker. The thought of being a speaker on gay issues to my peers struck fear into my heart, yet a reciprocal burning desire to charge at the opportunity took precedence.

Kristin and I made our first presentation at our high school when only ten days were left in the school year. It was warm and sticky outside and a feeling of restlessness hung thick in the air. Sunlight shone through the windows; clumps of students sat near the windows, soaking in the sun like little green plants. My attention wasn't focused on the weather, however. I was about to make my first presentation to a classroom full of peers. Before walking into the classroom, I almost threw up. I put my head between my legs and told Kristin I didn't think I could do the presentation.

"Don't do this for anybody but you," Kristin said fearlessly. "Later you can worry about the other people. Talking about being gay is only going to make this easier for both of us in our own lives. And maybe you can even take the fear factor out of the word "gay" by showing them we're just like them. Maybe you can help stomp out homophobia and help stop hate and ignorance." She paused before she delivered the clincher. "But you're never going to do that unless you take my hand and walk through that door right now. You have less than three minutes to decide before we're supposed to speak."

My heart told me to get up. I knew I wanted to do this presentation. I shifted my mindset from fear to confidence. I called to mind everything I knew about myself and about being gay. As we walked through the door of the classroom, I smelled the familiar antiseptic smell of our health and science department. From neat little rows of desks thirty pairs of eyes peered at me silently with hints of curiosity and skepticism.

"My name is Josh and this is Kristin," I said calmly and crisply. "We're from PROUD, the school's Gay/Straight Alliance and we're here to talk to you about being gay and particularly about being gay in high school." After that point

I was on a roll. Kristin and I told them our personal stories and then moved to a group discussion format, allowing the students to ask any questions they had for us.

By the end of the day I felt like I had helped make the world a better place. I hadn't cured cancer, I hadn't won the Presidential nomination, I hadn't figured out how to feed starving children in Somalia. I had, however, told 92 peers about my life and helped dispel fears and stereotypes of gay people.

I felt I could have strapped on running shoes that very moment and run a marathon in two hours flat. I felt I had found a purpose in life. I had done a very, very good thing.

Two years have passed since I sat on that rickety old dock, confessing to my long-time girlfriend I was gay. I have conquered my fears and become educated on the topic of gay rights and discrimination. I take care of myself emotionally, physically, and spiritually. As a result of my new experiences, I've become comfortable within my own skin.

I've told aunts, uncles, teachers, cousins, friends, and acquaintances who I am. I have a support network stronger than a block of stainless steel. With the exception of my parents, each and every person has greeted me with open arms and congratulations on my honesty. Everywhere I go I hold my head up and stop letting the little things bother me and scare me. I found direction in my life. I've come home to myself.

Reflections

Joshua:

"*Coming Home to Myself*" was a piece which I thought about for months. I tried to figure out how I could tell my own story in such a way that an audience of any age and any sexual orientation could appreciate what I wrote. Finally, in an advanced writing course with my favorite English teacher (Cindy Kalland, Hopkins High School) I decided it was time to put my thoughts and experiences into writing. The entire essay took me one afternoon to write. After I wrote it, I made only small changes to problems with word choice and grammatical errors. The piece remains much as it was as I wrote it during that single afternoon. I had months to think about what I needed to say and how I would say it, so the final piece was relatively easy to write. I ended up with a piece which, I hope, touches (or at least causes one to think) regardless of age or sexual orientation.

Joshua's Teacher, Cindy Kalland: When Students Write about Sensitive Topics

Teaching a student such as Josh Helmin is not work—it's sheer pleasure. Not only is he clearly talented, but he's highly motivated and open to suggestion, minimal though my suggestions may have needed to be. Of course, sensitive subjects such as Josh's require a bit more care from the teacher than less personal ones. I have tried to establish an open atmosphere in my class by using personal narrative/reflection assignments with former students' models of writing and lists of topics illustrating both intensely private and not so private student writing. When using these kinds of assignments, I also stay away from my usual required in-class peer conferencing. Instead, I tell students they need to conference with at least two other people whom they choose either in or out of class. This way, they feel less exposed.

When I receive a paper on a sensitive subject, I respond in writing in two different ways. I make the usual comments about paragraph coherence or subject/verb agreement, but then I also write a separate "letter" to the student commenting on the content only. This is my own personal response to the piece as well as thanks for sharing/trusting, and offers of talking more if the student wishes. Sometimes if I think a student is not thinking clearly or is confused, anxious, or upset, I'll offer some gentle advice or suggestions.

I think it is our responsibility as English teachers to give kids writing opportunities which allow for expression, self-examination, and reflection as part of the hard adolescent job of identity formation. It is also our responsibility to be willing to accept what kids have to say, give them support, refer them to others who can help when appropriate, and, of course, contact the right people if we suspect danger. I can't say I had a lot to do with Josh's piece of writing—other than to give him the opportunity to write and whatever support he needed.

Personal Narrative

To See is To Know

Annaliese Werner

Richfield High School, grade 11

I've heard that to truly understand someone, you have to see the world through their eyes. Often, this task is simple. We are very similar to the people we come in contact with on a daily basis. On rare occasions, we are forced to look through eyes of experience we would rather not understand. We are forced to re-evaluate ourselves.

Last year, I was riding the city bus to my morning class at Augsburg College. The bus was nearly full, which is unusual for the middle of the morning on a week day. There were just a few blocks until my stop, and I was preparing to get off the bus.

The doors opened, but the expected passenger didn't jump on and deposit fare. A young woman stood outside the doors, struggling with a bag she had on a roll-behind cart.

Her hair was dirty and appeared to have been cut without looking. Her jeans were torn across the knee, and the skin beneath was covered with unhealed abrasions. She also had on a dingy windbreaker, which must have done little to hold off the chill of the cold winter day.

As she continued to struggle with her bag, she let out moans bordering on sobs. All the able-bodied people on the bus, including myself, sat and tried not to look. Even the bus driver failed to offer aid.

Seconds dragged on like eternities as we all willed someone else to help her. I was torn by disbelief and a deep feeling of discomfort that no one would help her. Minutes passed by before I finally rose and walked to the entrance of the bus, leaning over to help her lift her bag up the steps, feeling the stare of too many eyes. She tried to brush my hands away, making noises that urged me back to my seat.

I don't remember what her face looked like, or the faces of those who sat with their eyes averted after she struggled down the aisle. The driver had waved her past the fare box after we both got back on the bus, sensing like the rest of us that she had nothing to deposit.

The impression that has stayed with me for all this time is looking into her frightened, confused, red-rimmed eyes. I don't know what it is to be homeless or hungry or alone in the world. I have not felt the fear or confusion of trying to find my way without help.

I have looked through the eyes of someone who has felt these things, and it has changed me forever. We all hope that we would jump to help someone in need and try to bear some of their burden for them. We can't know if we actually would until we are looking fear, confusion, pain, and suffering in the eyes.

Annaliese's Reflection:

One of the biggest problems I had while writing this paper is making it say what I wanted it to. In my first drafts, I had trouble making it clear that this wasn't just an unusual experience that I promptly forgot about. I went home and cried that night, unable to process what I had been feeling and why it had taken me so long to help her. The other challenge I dealt with was not making the paper focus on me. I wanted the reader to think Wow, what would I have done? rather than thinking Geez, that must have been hard for her to deal with. Hopefully the reader will spend some time on self-reflection after reading this piece.

Poetry

Mr. McCullough

Mr. McCullough was a crabby old man
who lived next door.
Mr. McCullough's wife was dead.
His only son never visited.

Mom said, "Be nice."
Dad said, "Be polite."
Jimmy said,
"Let's smash all his windows,
with rotten apples."

Mr. McCullough yelled at us
For baseballs in his garden,
For toilet paper in his trees,
For footsteps across his yard in winter,
and for loud music late at night.

Mr. McCullough hated newspapers
He thought the whole world was a lie.
He didn't like technology,
so he didn't have a car.

All he did, all day long,
Was sit in his lawn chair,
with his hose,
Watering his precious rosebush.

In the winter,
He'd sit at his front window.
Just staring.

Mom said, "Ask him if he needs help."
Dad said, "Wave when you walk by."
Jimmy said, "Let's cut the heads off
his prized roses!"

Now I wished I had waved.
Wished I had helped out.
Now I wish I had been nice.
Because now there is no one to yell
when we trample flowers looking for
lost pop flies.
No one to yell when we climb the apple tree,
looking for ripe ones.

No familiar little old man
in a green fishing hat
sitting in a lawn chair
holding a hose.

No crabby old soul,
to frown at us when we smile.

Mr. McCullough is gone.
All that's left is his little bleak house,
with a sold sign in front.

"Oh, the poor man," Mom says.
"What a pity, a pity indeed," says Dad.
Jimmy says, with a grin,
"It's just too, too bad!"

I look out the window at all the dead roses
that I can remember always being so
springy and red.
And I feel sad.

Megan Hupp

Annunciation School, grade 8

The Colored Past

Jaidyn Maria Martin

Champlin Park High School, grade 11

"Did you hear about the fight?"

Of course I had heard about the fight. How could I escape the constant conversation of the fight? The altercation had grabbed the entire community's attention so completely, it was interesting. How this fight changed me and my perspective is truly amazing.

The reason the fight became such an ordeal can never really be explained. It broke out a week before spring break. It was finals and everyone was edgy. The tension could be felt everywhere as three thousand students prepared for two weeks of total teenage freedom from responsibility. This lack of order appeared to be bleeding into our studies. We could feel it deep down within us, the urge to stir, the need to break loose. Everyone was worn out and ready for something exciting. Everyone wanted something to talk about, and racism was definitely that something.

One boy – white and popular – fighting another boy – black and of a shady character. The players of this saga mounted the scandal. Specifically, the race and social status of the players and the racial slanders exchanged between the two ravaged the high school. Sides were drawn, and opinions formed based on racial outlooks. We found it hard to focus on our studies with such controversial questions being asked.

It was everywhere – among the faculty, the community, and most of all, the students. "Where do you stand on the racism issue? Do you think that what they said to one another was justified by their actions? Who are your friends?" These were the real questions being asked between the students. The faculty were asking different questions: "Will our school become known as a school with racial issues? What do you, as a student, feel about the incident? What can we do to sort things out for the betterment of the school?" For the first time in my high school career it felt as if no one, not even the adults, had an idea of what was going to happen next. None had the control to decide. With the mounting spring heat, the students became more restless, and the topic would not die down.

In most of the social studies classes, the students were asked about their thoughts on racism. There seemed to be a demand on the accelerated social studies classes to find a solution to the question, "How can we create peace in our community?" The pressure was on us to create the peace, and the truth was that we had no idea how. We were dealing with the extremely difficult problem of racism and most of us had never really considered the topic. Student Council decided to hand out yellow ribbons to advocate peace. We were all wearing them in our social studies class as we tried to create a lasting peace.

In a roundtable discussion on the issue, I began to see people differently, my friends differently, and myself differently. Amazing characters in my life, who I had just known as my friends: A.J., Pooja, Sam, and Sarah became African American, Eastern Indian, Vietnamese, and Korean. I sat there and for the first time I realized what ethnicity my friends were. Were my friends figuring out what ethnicity I was for the first time? Who was I?

I had never asked myself that question before. My mother was white – she could have been no one else but my mother to me – and my father Philipino – just plain old Dad. What was I? I was raised in America. Most of my Asian relatives lived half the world away from me. I was raised "white." I never thought of myself as ethnic, never as different, and as I sat in class, I began to wonder what I thought about myself.

Did I think I was white? What did others think of me? Was I just a girl with a tan to everyone? Was I just a girl with a tan to me?

I hadn't thought to learn about my Philipino background, or to be proud of it. We went around the circle talking about our different perspectives, and I was surprised to be somewhat left out. Most felt the pressure to be more "white." My problem was the opposite. As I listened to the other diverse students and their rich home life, I began to feel inadequate. I felt like I was too "white" and not ethnic enough. It never occurred to me to be something more different. In fact the thought of being asked about my heritage scared me for I didn't think I would have a sufficient answer.

These thoughts stewed in my head for days as I began to notice how people perceived me. The strangeness in the hallways became more intensified. The students were advised not to hang out in the hallways between classes, considering the incessant fact that many fights broke out after the first major fight. All the different ethnic groups would look at each other in the hallways, trying to decipher where everyone stood on the issue and where on the racial scale they fell. As I walked through the crowded halls of sweaty, nervous little creatures I called fellow students, I noticed no one looked at me that way. I had, in a way, blended into the masses.

Living in north Minneapolis for a small part of my pre-high school education never brought me to question multiculturalism. Our family had always been multiracial. My cousin's babies were half African American and half Caucasian; I had half Hispanic and Caucasian cousins; and my family was half Philipino and half Caucasian. I suddenly became sensitive to comments regarding multiculturalism. I overheard someone calling us the "racially watered down." I found myself very confused and I had no witty comeback to her political incorrectness. The question remained. What were we? Why was I, in particular, not to be considered ethnic enough, racially watered down? What was ethnic enough?

A while later I went to a friend's house. She was rather popular and she had influence on people's ideas. This guy who was also socially influential came over. He was nice to me, and it was obvious he kind of liked me. I was talking to someone else when a comment caught my attention. "He ripped me off; he was such a Jew." The guy said that this person was "such a Jew." I almost couldn't believe

my ears; he was implying that because this person got a good deal, he was Jewish.

I didn't want to look up; I didn't want to respond in any way. I didn't want to show that the comment had offended me or laugh nervously. I hated it. I shook it off. I reasoned to myself that I wasn't Jewish and that he wasn't making fun of me, so why should I respond. Then later that night I overheard the boy talking to one of the girls. The conversation was hard to follow considering I wasn't involved, but I understood that he was looking for a confederate flag bandana, and the girl had told him she saw one in a store and it reminded her of him. The boy smiled and told her that he thought he could "Jew his friend down to five dollars" for one. Then he turned around and said something really sweet to me. I couldn't believe it, and I didn't know where I stood on the whole matter. There I was, an ethnic person whose father emigrated from another country, a minority. I wasn't Jewish, but as a minority, I still felt threatened. He liked me, and I found that I was put into a strange position. If he only knew who I was, and more importantly what I was. It didn't even dawn on him that he was flirting with someone he pretended to hate. The hypocrisy hit me like lead. At that moment I knew him more than he knew himself. I could feel how it was to be loved and hated at the same time – to be accepted and discriminated against in the same breath.

At that moment I realized the answers to the questions being asked, and it all became very clear to me. All the confusion of the fight, the "Jew incident," and my own racial questions melted away and I was at peace. I was the most diverse and the most different. The question I had been pondering became more defined. The question wasn't "What am I?" The question became "Who am I?" I realized I had something better. I was in the middle, the girl that could see both. It wasn't up to me to form an opinion of how I felt as a minority; it was how I felt as a person dealing with intolerance in everyone and everything. I learned to understand that what makes me special isn't my heredity, it's me and all of me. My ideas, my feelings, and my future are what make me special. One day, not so far off in the future everyone will see the way I do, through education and cultural understanding. We, the multicultural, will be known, not as "half-breeds," or "racially watered-down," but many races blended into one. Then I realized, maybe one day people will see the way I see. I see the people, the lives, not the colored past.

Taken for Granted

Jenny Annunziata

Osseo High School, grade 10

As I stood outside our maroon Delta 88 waiting for my mom to get out, the cold wind brought my eyes to a water and messed my hair. For a couple of seconds I stood, body erect, surrounded by the cold darkness of the October night. I listened to the wind chimes of the trailer home exactly to the left of my grandmother's tiny brown and white one. From them came a haunting song that seemed to go from loud and angry to sad and weepy.

"Hurry up, Mom. It's getting cold out here," I said raising the tone of my voice and rolling my eyes.

"Jenny, don't start with me now," she snapped back. "I still have to get the dishes out of the trunk."

"Well," I muttered, feeling annoyed, "if Grandma would've come to the house on her way to the doctor to pick them up like she said she was, we wouldn't even be here." I rolled my eyes.

My mom shifted the medium-sized box of clattering dishes from her left arm to her right, shut the trunk and strode past me. With my arms folded across my chest, I followed directly behind her, attempting to block the skin-numbing wind.

We stood outside the white door of my grandmother's tiny tin trailer waiting for her to respond to our multiple knocks. My mom began to look impatient, and my chest began to hurt from taking in the cold autumn air. The song of the chimes seemed to die down now, no longer changing melodies. It seemed as if they were no longer interested in the situation.

"Mom, the hall light is on so she must be home," I said, wandering around the fairly large brown deck.

"Jenny, go and see if you can see into her room from the far window."

I lazily made my way down the three small steps of the deck, my annoyance growing, and peered into the window. All I could see, though, was an empty room dimly lit by the hall light. Turning to meet my mom at the front, I heard her footsteps shuffling across the gravel on the driveway. Upon reaching the gravel, though, I saw her dark form disappear around the corner of my grandmother's trailer.

"Where are you going?" I yelled.

"To check the windows on this side," she replied.

"Mom, maybe she's really not home. Maybe she went somewhere for the day and that's why she didn't come over."

"Jenny, the neighbor I talked to before we left said her car was here all day."

And sure enough, to my right was my grandmother's old black car. I looked around, suddenly feeling lonely standing there in the back yard. It was as if the blackness of the night wanted to swallow me. Overtaken by this sudden dread and my shortening tolerance for the whole situation, I made my way back to the Delta.

After 60 seconds ticked by twenty times, and my mother had circled the trailer again and again, a feeling of guilt began to settle in my stomach. Watching my mom put herself in a frenzy because her mother wouldn't answer our knocks was a painful, pathetic, yet heart-warming sight that motivated me to get out of the car and help my mom, who looked as if she was a scared young girl.

"Jen," she said in a voice slightly above a whisper. "Please go check the front windows again."

Passing by the windchimes and through the dew-covered grass, I rounded the corner of my grandmother's trailer. The sound of the chimes was muffled on that side of the trailer, and the only source of light was the pale orange glow of a corner street lamp.

Once again I skimmed the windows and saw nothing. As I went over them again, I stopped at the one looking in on the kitchen. It was the biggest of them all, reaching from the ceiling to the floor. When I looked toward the top of it, the only thing I saw was the reflection of the street lamp that stood alone on the corner. Letting my eyes fall lower, I saw the outline of the kitchen table. Falling even lower, my eyes caught the sight of a pale white figure in the lower right corner of the window. Fear draped itself over my body. I no longer felt the cold winds or heard the song of the distant windchimes. The only thing I felt was stabbing panic. With my face pressed against the glass, I cupped my hands around my eyes to get a clearer look. In an instant I recognized the pale white of my grandmother's hand.

"Mom!" I choked out. My eyes were wide and scared. All I could do was point. She looked and with no explanation, our feet swept over the wet grass, pounded on the gravel of the driveway, and bounded of the three steps of the deck. With an unknown strength my mom's shoulder followed by her hip broke down the door. Feeling the wall frantically for a light switch, I could swear I actually heard my own heart beating. In an instant the lights were on and tears filled my eyes as I looked down upon my dead grandmother who I had taken for granted.

A Perfect Picture of You

I know a word or phrase exists that paints the perfect picture of you.

But as I try to form it,
To use my words to sketch you,
I fumble and lose sight of my thoughts.

It's that Something about you!
The thing that tightens my belly
And takes my breath away.
You're the one who lifts me up
'Til I taste the sweet glow of stars.

I can't recall how it came or when it hit
How you plucked my heart from her sturdy roots.
Like a wave or darkness or an embrace,
You enfold me, surround me, guide me.

Continually amazing me,
This smile is inspired by you and
Your magical, mystical, wonderful Something.
It sweeps me away
And cradles my heart.

Julianne Nelson

Minnetonka High School, grade 11