

# center for the *Arts!*

---



## 2022 Winning Entries

With Appreciation to Judge Megan Baxter

### Poetry

1. August Bates-KRHS- *Small Towns*
2. Emma Geraghty-KRHS- *Beautiful(?)*
3. Elle Labrie-Lavalley-Proctor Academy  
*Flowers on a Sunny August Day*

### Fiction

1. Annaliese Rowell-Sunapee HS- *Restart*
2. Josefina Eliessetch-KRHS -*Made of Memories*
3. Luna Landers, KRHS-*The Jake Partridge Effect*

### Non-Fiction

1. Jenna Carson, Sunapee HS  
*Checks and Balances*

**First Place Poetry**  
**August Bates-Warner-KRHS**

***Small Towns***

Nothing really happens here.  
Except for the odd  
Runaway dog,  
Turning up dead.

Streets lined with crumbling buildings,  
Red brick and concrete.  
New houses shine,  
Shine like jewels.

Dull factories, like spirits,  
Haunting old towns.  
Abandoned now,  
Bustling back then.

Tall statues rise over parks,  
Carved of stone and tears.  
A thought of war,  
And those who died.

Nothing really happens here.  
Except for the new,  
Pink graffiti,  
Made in the night.

**Second Place Poetry**  
**Emma Geraghty-Sutton-KRHS**

***Beautiful(?)***

Staring at myself in the mirror for the hundredth time  
criticizing each and every little detail  
I start at my feet and work my way up my body  
thighs that must be thinner,  
a stomach that needs to be flatter,  
arms with too much hair,  
scabs scattered across my limbs  
the farther I go the more I hurt,  
the more I stare the more I find wrong  
a face that's too pale,  
cheeks that are flushed red,  
I stare at my boring brown eyes,  
straight frizzy hair,  
birthmarks in spots where they shouldn't be  
I stare and stare and stare  
suddenly see something I've never seen before  
It isn't much, but it's something  
A seam, almost invisible, but a seam, right there on my  
cheek  
I finger at it and it begins to peel

I peel and peel, until a layer of myself comes off  
to reveal chocolate brown skin, deep beautiful eyes and  
black hair thick with curls  
I almost cry out with joy  
but then I see them  
all the things wrong, all the same faults  
thighs that should be thinner  
a stomach that should be flatter  
I look for the seam with desperation and find it again

I peel and peel until another layer arrives,  
this time with incredibly pale skin, light blond hair with a  
slight wave and brilliant blue eyes  
the faults appear again  
thin spindly legs,  
pimples in all the wrong places,  
I keep finding the seam and peeling and peeling,  
with each new layer there are new colors, shapes, and  
sizes.  
And with each layer come the same faults,  
the same embarrassments,  
I go faster and faster until I start to notice things

Birthmarks and scars forming constellations across the  
body  
each shape of the limb and body curves, complimenting  
each other  
How no matter the eye color all of them are deep with  
stories and knowledge  
I start to slow down,  
the next layer has beautifully light brown skin and black  
hair, amber eyes that shine in the  
fluorescent bathroom lights,  
all the things that I had criticized before  
but now,  
now they shine

Somehow I just know,  
I find the seam again and peel  
this time I see myself  
the same old boring brown eyes,  
boring brown hair,  
but this time I see things I didn't see before as well  
my birthmarks and freckles creating constellations and  
shapes

my scars aren't signs of embarrassment but signs of  
victory  
how my body too curves, flows and compliments itself  
I notice the reddish highlights in my hair when the light hits  
it and how it falls naturally around  
my face  
the bright pink in my cheeks that I hated looks like a  
natural blush that people race to the store  
to buy in powder  
then I land on my eyes,  
what I thought was a boring brown,  
Is really a light brown with an amber ring and dark brown  
speckles, so many colors in two eyes  
that are filled with wonder

I almost turn away from the mirror when I see one last  
thing,  
I thought the seam had gone away,  
well it did, from my cheek at least  
I see it, smack dab between my eyes,  
I slowly peel it away and it reveals a bright flash of light,  
my whole body is sunlight,  
I can see all the shapes, colors and sizes of all the other  
girls I've seen  
I realize how lucky we all are.  
To have the beautiful bodies we have.  
This starlight is hidden down in each of us  
The glowing dies down and I see myself again,  
And for once  
I smile  
I turn away from the mirror  
And for the first time I am content  
But even better  
I am happy

### **Third Place Poetry**

#### **Elle Labrie-Lavalley-Andover-Proctor Academy**

##### ***Flowers on a Sunny August Day***

A day of remembrance but I didn't always remember it this way.

Once a stranger now a blue mark on my face.

I will forever wear these marks as a reminder of the kindness and the greed of the hands who held me where I was not meant to be held, and the hands that planted a seed within my body.

A seed of flowers.

Flowers and assault.

These flowers grow back no matter how many times I cut them back down.

The thorns will always grow back no matter how many times I cut them down.

The thorns will always grow leaving cuts the color of blue.

The marks continue to appear as the story burns my skin, I realize speaking up is the most difficult thing I will ever do.

My bruised knees pulled to my breathless chest, my bathing suit top clinging to my body, basically a straight jacket because my mind was as insane as the words I thought I would never have to say.

Wrapped in a towel trying to disappear yet in plain sight like a kid playing hide and seek.

Like a kid small and afraid.

Why would anyone do this?

They are too young for this, I am too young for this!

My own voice gashes at my throat like sticks and stones as I'm told words will never hurt me but when he tells me I'm beautiful and attacks me like a lion going after prey his words hurt because I know he only said them to get away with another touch.

Those words hurt more than any stick or stone I've ever felt.

They slowly kill me from the inside out.

Blood spills with my voice, flowers begin to grow from the pit in my stomach.

Thorns pricking me as my throat closes.

Engulfed in the love of a mother not my mom but the mother of another and with all the love, empathy, and intelligence, I have been gifted, I feel as though this is my mom.

She is the one that helped me when I was most vulnerable.

Another mother to me but a stranger to many, a woman who can open minds and make the world turn slower as the stars shine brighter my smile grows larger and her words will forever impact the way I think.

As she embraces me I feel as though a wave has crashed down on my sacred island of calm and serenity.

My tears stain her shirt like paint on a sweatshirt from third grade that you can't seem to get out no matter how hard you try.

But will still never get rid of because we risk the feeling of when we were young.

I remember the words of my sister, my go to person for anything and everything.

Confused and understanding yet her voice sounded unfamiliar like a candy I have never tried leaving a sour taste in my mouth as she passed me to my dad.

My dad, oh my dad was livid.

I might as well have been the judge myself because I was the one who stopped him not wanting his emotions to lead him behind bars.

Andrew, a young police officer from Lincoln New Hampshire a true hero as his calm words ass pollen to my flowers bringing bumble bees to fight against the harsh words that did in fact hurt me. I remember being

disconnected from my own self from the beauty that I didn't even recognize as my own because I could only hear his voice saying it.

It is all these things, all these memories, these illusions of false hope that even past therapists refused to help with that will forever affect me.

Thoughts race through my head every single day as a reminder. Just like the marks on my face and the flowers in my hair.

Growing blue like the clothes I wore that day.

I now know that no matter what I wear or what I look like my body will always be a home to the flowers that killed me, just waiting for another person to plant more seeds.

So the flowers can be a rainbow of a sight.



## **First Place Fiction**

**Annaliese Rowell, Sunapee, Sunapee High School**

### ***Restart***

People say scars tell your story, but right now mine just hurts. No one knows about my scars, no one sees the hurt, but it's there. The one thing I want, more than anything in the world, is for someone, anyone to see what lies beneath the mask I put on everyday. But I'm too scared.

Too scared I'll be outcasted. Too scared I'll be accused of lying or seeking attention. I want someone to know, but I don't want to tell them. So here I am, telling you.

...

The rain rolled down my steel roof; the constant pitter patter made my head spin. This would normally be soothing and comforting, but believe me it gets a little old after 8 days. Yes, it had been raining for 8 days straight. I don't know what to call the opposite of a drought, but whatever it is, that's what our little town of Lockwood, South Carolina was going through. My bed was smooth and cold as I lay there smothering my ears with a pillow, wishing to wake up and hear something other than the drip, drip, drip of rain hitting my window. As I drifted off to sleep, the rain permeated my dreams, it was almost as if I could feel the drips hitting my arms as I lived through my dreams. The next morning the brightest array of red, blue, and white lights showed through my window. I shot out of bed, my heart racing I rushed to the window. It hadn't stopped raining. It was 2 o'clock in the morning and outside there were sirens and police lights.

I jumped out of bed at the sight and my heart stopped as I rushed outside to see what was happening. I live in an apartment complex, so basically I have 7 built in neighbors that I kind of had to make friends with or I'd be miserable.

At the sight of the ambulance in our driveway, my heart dropped to the floor, my mind went to the most horrible of places: someone died. But as soon as that thought crossed my mind I was pushed out of the way of a gurney. On that gurney was my neighbor Aleah. She's 21, younger than I am. She was alive, but barely.

"Umm, excuse me? What's happening, what happened to Aleah? What's going on? Is she dying? Is she dead?" I frantically let out all of my questions at once. It poured out of me,

I thought the worst.

The EMT replied coldly, "Everything is fine ma'am, please go back inside."

I didn't really know Aleah, but she was so young. What could have possibly gone wrong?

The actual next morning I was woken up with a call from Aleah's parents. She was alive, but brain dead. Essentially, there's no chance she'll wake up, no chance she'll get to finish out her life. She was gone. Horror filled my head. I felt as though I shouldn't be allowed to live if Aleah wasn't. I was guilty. I began to dissociate and distance myself from the situation by saying things like "It'll never happen to me" or "My life is so different than hers; that could never be me".

That was my first mistake.

The morning's earlier events caused panic. I couldn't form sentences, I could barely walk. I was shaking as I picked up the phone to call my boss. I was barely able to get out the words "I can't come in today." I was broken. One of the perks of my job is that I can work from home whenever I want or need to. I'm a medical salesperson and I can make sales from the comfort of my couch and pajamas, so why wouldn't I. However, this also works to my disadvantage. It means I don't have to go into work and see my coworkers. It means

I don't have to make friends. But most of the time that's how I like it: solitary. Most of the time, but not this time.

I stayed home from work, but realized I didn't have anything for breakfast, or lunch, or dinner. I was out of food. So, I made the logical decision to go out to get food. I got in my car and I had the most bizarre feeling. It felt like in those movies when you have a vision. I'm not kidding, it felt like I was being shot into the future. I saw an 18-wheeler, headlights blinding me, horn blaring. I smelled the burnt rubber of the wheels screeching on the pavement. But the strangest thing: I didn't know what it meant. Was this me? What was gonna happen? Was it a near miss or did this person get hurt? What did this mean? WHAT did this mean?

I panicked in my car. I sat there, staring out my windshield. I watched each raindrop slide down the window. I felt my rough leather seats as my nails dug into them, clasp on like my life depended on it. I sat like this for 10 minutes. Ten minutes, I sat there, not blinking, not breathing, just existing. Eventually I regained my composure. I put my life back on track and I drove to the store. I passed four 18-wheelers on my way. Each time, my heart stopped. The breath left my lungs, it felt like I was choking, drowning without air. And then it happened. All of the panic I had previously felt was nothing compared to what was coming.

I was driving down some back road that only those who drove in my neighborhood knew about. So I was confused to say the least when I saw an 18 wheeler barreling toward me. I had the feeling again, the panic, the horror. I couldn't breath, I couldn't see. I pulled off to the side of the road. I thought I would be safer there. I pulled off onto the grassy area and broke down in tears. I screamed out of fear with white knuckles gripping my steering wheel.

I felt the tears running down my face like a waterfall. I heard a horn and immediately looked up. I saw bright yellow headlights flying toward me, blurred from my crying. I was terrified; it all made sense. I knew what that vision meant. I pieced it together in the split seconds before impact. I knew what was coming. That's the last thing I remember.

I woke up in the hospital. I couldn't hear anything. I could see peoples lips moving, I knew they were trying to speak, but I just couldn't hear them. There was only silence. People were rushing around me. Dozens of people. All trying to help me. But it was silent. There were flashing lights everywhere. I felt the cold, gloved hands of the doctors all over my body. I panicked and tried to get up, but I couldn't move. I felt the leather strap over my stomach holding me in place. The plastic brace, pinching my neck, but holding it still. I was helpless. I couldn't do anything to help myself, to save myself. I just had to trust the doctors. And trust was something I wasn't very good at. Suddenly, the chaotic calmness of the doctors turned into real panic. I could feel the air in the room change. It became stale, like it feels when something bad happens and no one wants to say it out loud. I could tell the doctors were trying to tell me what was happening, but I couldn't hear them. All I heard was silence. The next thing I know it all went black.

I woke up in a hospital room. Usually when you wake up in the hospital, you're surrounded by friends and family. I was alone. Alone and scared. I was finally able to hear, but only a little. I woke up and no one noticed. A feeling I was soon to get used to. Eventually a nurse saw I was awake and rushed in. She checked all of my vitals, made sure the constant, nagging beeping of the dozens of machines next to me was normal. She then proceeded to change my life forever: she told me what happened.

“You were in an accident,” the nurse said, “and you were hurt pretty bad.”

*No duh.* I thought to myself. *Don't you think I gathered that?*

“Now, don't try to talk, you have a tube in your throat to help you breathe, but your injuries were pretty severe. You hit your head very hard and we won't know for sure, but we think you have some deficits. There's a chance you will be paralyzed. There's also a chance your personality will be a little bit different. But don't worry we will help you figure it all out.”

Those words. Those few sentences changed my life forever. The next few days doctors were in and out of my room every few minutes. I was terrified--and alone. I was alone in one of the scariest times of my life. I had brain damage from the accident that was irreversible. I wasn't me anymore. I couldn't remember anything from before the accident, but I remembered Aleah. I was so naive, so ignorant. I kept getting better in the hospital, well as good as I could be for having a new personality and being a new paraplegic. But getting better terrified me. It terrified me because at least at the hospital the nurses and doctors cared about me. If I went home, no one would care, no one would come visit, no one would help me.

So much was happening, but at the same time so little. Everyday was the same, yet also so different. I would wake up, nurses would come in, check my vitals, and it would happen this same way every 3 hours. I just felt numb. Like I was going through the motions of everyday waiting to feel something. I felt like my life had been flipped upside down and I didn't know if I wanted to see how I was going to survive it. For a minute it didn't seem living for. This vicious cycle went on for 3 more days before I went home.

When the nurse wheeled me into my apartment I almost choked on the smell of my own home. I was so used to the sterile, alcohol smell of the hospital that the sweet, lavender of my bedroom scared me. The nurse brought me to my living room and asked me if I needed anything. I stared at the wall, I don't even think I blinked as I told her I was fine. After the nurse left I sat in my wheelchair for an hour. Smelling the lavender of my diffusing drift through the air, feeling the leather of my seat rub against my back. The cold metal wheels under my hands. I felt like all I had left was the safety of my apartment. I felt that if I let go of the senses I was feeling I would never feel again. Eventually I convinced myself to call someone. I called my mom.

I never had a close relationship with my parents, especially not my mom. My parents got divorced when I was 9, so I basically raised myself. I called my mom and told her what happened.

"Uhh, hey mom, something happened."

"Oh, uh, hey Charlotte, could I call you back a little later? I'm really busy right now."

"Well, actually, this can't really wait. I got into an accident; I'm not really okay." I threw it out there, trying to make her stay on the line because I knew 'a little later' would never come. I would never actually talk to her again.

"Oh. Well, do you need anything? I can send over some food or something." I could tell she was busy. She blew me off like I was some unimportant case. Like I was a part of her job she could save for later. Her lack of empathy really showed through. "No, I don't need anything. I just need you. I need some support right now; I'm struggling."

"You see, I'm actually in the middle of something. I just got a really important case and I don't think I'll be available anytime soon."

I knew this would happen. I knew she would blow me off. It's been this way since I was little. Everytime I threw up at school and needed to go home she was "too busy". Some client will always be more important than her own daughter.

After I had exhausted my very short list of contacts, all of whom said they had more important things to do than console me, I crashed. I didn't know how to come back from this. I felt different. Not like I felt sick, I felt fundamentally different, like something in my core had changed. I didn't know how to be the Charlie I had been for the last 22 years. I searched deep within to try to figure out what was different, but I couldn't find it. That was just it, I couldn't find it because it wasn't there. I couldn't remember anything from before the accident. Who my friends were, my favorite food, my favorite color. None of it. The last thing I remember was my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. And I think that's because it was so traumatizing, no one showed up and all of my so-called *friends* laughed at me the next day. The most important years of my life, the years that shaped me into the woman I am today, were just gone, like they never even happened.

The next week was grueling. Trying to reestablish myself as a person was the hardest thing I've ever done. I wasn't me, I was someone else trapped in my body. I tried to make friends but the closest I got was my physical therapist. And I don't know about you, but I'm not going around bragging about my physical therapy friends. Essentially I had no one. My neighbors thought I was too high maintenance and I was too incapable to go out and make friends on my own, so I just didn't. I sat at home everyday becoming a little too familiar with my throw pillows. But things got bad. I stopped doing laundry, I would wear the same sweatpants for days in a row because it was too hard to change when my legs didn't work.

The dishes piled up because it was hard to wash them when I couldn't reach the counter from my chair. I spiraled. I fell down the drain. I didn't know what to do so I scoured my phone for someone to call. I needed someone to help me out of this mess I had created. Looking through all of my old contacts, bits and pieces of my previous life came back to me, but it didn't feel like mine. I didn't recognize names, and even when I did, I felt distanced from the life in which I knew them. But when I saw his name, a certain awful memory came flooding back.

I looked for upwards of a half an hour until I found Jeremy buried in my contacts. He was my best friend before I moved. We were inseparable; we'd do anything for each other. I felt awful calling him like this considering how I left things, but I needed someone and I knew he would help, so I did it.

"Uhh, hey, Jeremy? It's Charlie. I know we haven't talked in a while, and I feel terrible about how I left things. I feel terrible I haven't called back to fix things, but I need you. I need your help." I suffered in the long pause. I heard breathing on the other end of the line so I knew he was there. I just needed to hear his voice.

"Wow, hey Charlie. I haven't heard from you in a while. What's up? Is everything okay?"

I can't explain the feeling when I heard his voice. The tension in the air was gone. I could finally take a deep breath. "Umm, not really. I got into an accident. I'm paralyzed and I don't really remember much from before the accident. I just need help. I need someone to help me get my life back on track. Can you help me? If not, it's totally okay, I just figured I'd give it a shot."

I could hear the longing in his voice. The longing for me to reach out, the longing to see me again. "No, totally, just tell me what you need and I'll be there. I'll always be here for you, just say the word."



To tell you I was relieved would be a gross understatement. It was like something left me, a weight off my shoulders. I instantly felt lighter, more free. I felt like I could breathe again.

Later that night the doors flew open. My heart immediately felt a little bit lighter. Everything about him told me he was here to help. His arms were full with grocery bags. As he walked in, he dropped everything and came to me. He wanted to help. I sat by watching him wash my dishes, do my laundry, and clean my apartment. I felt guilty for asking for help. I sat there feeling like a burden. Watching my life pass by right in front of me. Once he was finished, Jeremy came and sat next to me on the couch. His warm, soft hand touched mine. He grasped it and in the softest manner possible he asked me "Is there anything, and I mean anything, else you need?"

I told him I just needed support. I needed a friend to talk to when things got tough. I needed him. Jeremy stayed with me for the next few months. We grew closer and closer and I learned to lean on him. I learned to accept the help he gave me. He brought me joy. He made me forget about the pain and suffering I was feeling all the time. He made me feel whole again. I don't know how to describe it, but I felt like the void in my heart had been filled. He was my best friend. He was the first one I wanted to tell when I learned something new at physical therapy. He was the one who I wanted to share my life with. At least for a few months.

Once we had outlived our "honeymoon phase" things started to go downhill. He started to distance himself from me. He stopped talking to me. Whenever I would share something good with him the only response I would get would be "Wow, that's really great." I stopped feeling the warmth when I was around him.

The feeling came back; the same feeling I felt when I was in the hospital, with the stale, broken air. I wanted us to stay together. I wanted him to be there for me; I wanted to be there for him. But I just couldn't; I couldn't excuse what he had done to me. He hurt me.

Seven years before my accident I was living in Maine with my family and all of my childhood friends, and Jeremy. We grew up together. We were so close, like siblings. Every time I was around him things just made sense, they just worked out. We went to the same college, took the same classes, we even got the same degree. We were inseparable. So you can imagine the pain I felt when I was asked to move across the country for work. It wasn't just that I was leaving my lifetime best friend, I was losing a part of me. It felt like one of my limbs was being torn away from me. Leading up to the move every time I thought about it my heart ached, I couldn't breathe. My lungs closed up and I couldn't talk. I felt horrible; I felt worse than horrible. I felt guilty, like I was the one breaking us up, the one responsible when we lost touch. Turns out, losing touch was one of the better things that happened in our relationship.

I felt so guilty for leaving that I never reached out to Jeremy again. For years I ignored his calls, his texts, everything. Eventually he stopped reaching out to me. He stopped asking me if I was okay. I thought maybe it just hurt too much. Maybe he realized that I needed space. Never in a million years did I think he would have moved on. When I had the accident I had forgotten about the last 5 years. I forgot that he had lost touch. I forgot we fell apart. So when I asked him for help I tried to fall back into the relationship I had known when we were younger. I was naive to think that nothing had changed.

The next day I went to PT as normal. Jeremy dropped me off and went over to Target to pass the time. I was having a great session, developing new strength, gaining new skills, I was doing really well. I went to take a water break by the window to cool off, but I saw the unthinkable. I looked around to see if what I saw was true when I realized that at some point it was raining. I looked back at the store window and it started raining harder. I saw it. I saw Jeremy embracing some other girl. In fact, that other girl was one of my childhood friends. To say I felt betrayed would be an understatement. It felt as though a part of me died at that moment. It was almost indescribable the amount of pain that I felt. I felt the breath leave my lungs. I felt my heart skip a beat. I almost passed out. I felt unsteady. I felt broken. There's no other way to put it, just broken.

When Jeremy came back to pick me up, I didn't say anything, I couldn't. I told him I called a cab. I told him he should just go; I didn't need his help anymore. That was the last I ever talked to him. He broke things for us. The least he could have done was tell me the truth, be honest. But he couldn't even give me that.

...

I have many scars. I hide them, from my friends, from my family ... from myself. Until today, I don't think I ever fully dissected what happened. I never let myself fully experience the pain I felt during this time. As I sit here telling you my story, I feel it. I feel the pain, the breathtaking hurt. The unexplainable agony. I sit here recounting the experiences that yes, have hurt me, but have also shaped me as the person I am today. I have seen first hand how the worst experiences of my life have also been the best ones. They have made me grow, made me realize my limits are far further than my body or my mind wants me to believe.

I have realized how strong I am. My scars hurt, they hurt like hell. But those people were right, they do tell a story, they tell my story. They show where I've been and how far I've come. They show me. All I can say is thank you. Thank you for listening. Thank you for being the one rock in my life, the one person who has stood by me. Thank you for convincing me my scars are worth showing. I love you little bro, rest peacefully

## **Second Place Fiction**

**Josefina Eliessetch, Sutton-KRHS**

### ***Made of Memories***

The day her daughter died was the worst day of Charlotte's entire life. In fact, that was an understatement. Her life was falling apart without Isabella. How had she lost her? Charlotte's memories of the day were both too vivid and too dim...

The day had started off as any other. Charlotte had been baking cookies, again, and Isabella had been teasing Charlotte about it.

"Don't burn the house down, mom, okay?" Isabella told her mother. Charlotte found herself smiling at the thirteen-year-old.

"I'm not planning on doing that," she told her daughter.

"Can you hand me the sugar?"

"Here," Isabella did as she'd asked. Charlotte may have accidentally put in more than what was necessary, but it was fine. A little sugar never hurt anyone.

"Can you hand me the chocolate chips?" Charlotte asked Isabella, as she struggled to mix the dough. Her daughter obeyed, and Charlotte added half the bag of chocolate chips. The rest she saved for later, just in case the cookies didn't turn out. Which they would, of course. This time, Charlotte was actually sticking to the recipe, meaning the cookies would turn out.

“I’m gonna go outside,” Isabella said to her mother. “It’s a beautiful day! Also, I don’t want to be in here when the cookies burn and the smoke detector goes off,” she winked and giggled. Then, she threw her arms around Charlotte and hugged her mother. She’d always been generous with hugs.

“Okay, but don’t wander too far,” Charlotte said. She nodded as she stepped out into the yard.

Charlotte soon had put the cookies into the oven. She would not burn them this time. Not again... She’d never managed to bake a good batch of cookies. It was as if there was a cookie curse on her or something.

She looked out the window and saw Isabella happily skipping, full of life, full of joy. She was near a tree, which had a swing tied to it, one that Charlotte’s ex-husband, Matthew, had built. He and Charlotte had gotten divorced a few years earlier and he was still a sore subject. However, she kept the swing to remind her of the olden days.

Charlotte turned back to the oven and she set a timer for when the cookies would be done. It was then that a scream cut through the air. *Isabella*, Charlotte realized. She turned to the window, seeing her daughter sprawled on the ground. A million different fears surged through her mind as Charlotte grabbed her cell phone and raced outside. She dialed 9-1-1 right away, her hands trembling.

“Izzy, wake up,” Charlotte shook her daughter gently. Isabella’s brown eyes were shut. Her skin had rashes on it, but felt cold to the touch. *This is not happening, this is not happening, THIS IS NOT HAPPENING!!!* She thought, alarmed. “Izzy, please!”

The sound of wailing sirens filled the air, the ambulance arriving at last. Tears spilled down her cheeks as multiple paramedics rushed to her daughter. It was as though time were slowing down, as they checked on her, then looked up at Charlotte and shook their heads sadly.

She collapsed in tears, sobbing over her daughter’s body. She couldn’t believe it. She couldn’t accept it. Isabella was simply too young. This girl she was holding on to wasn’t her daughter. Isabella had to be alive...

Charlotte had never lost a daughter before. She couldn’t believe she’d lost Isabella. Not as the doctors had tried to comfort her did she believe it. Not as multiple friends and relatives had offered their condolences did she accept it. Nothing could snap Charlotte out of her denial.

Isabella wasn’t dead. She lived in Charlotte’s memories, in her thoughts, in pictures, in stories. Charlotte believed her daughter was there. She talked to her. She always thought about her. She bought her daughter’s favorite foods, then ended up eating them herself, just like the old times. Everything was normal, everything was fine, because Isabella wasn’t really dead.

Maybe Charlotte could no longer see her, but she knew her daughter wasn't dead.

These were the thoughts that got her through every day. That was how she'd get through this: denial. Charlotte would wake up thinking of Isabella, she'd go to sleep thinking about her. It was a routine, a second nature.

It was just a year later when it happened. As she was watching one of her daughter's favorite show, Charlotte suddenly saw Isabella, right by the window in the living room. "Izzy?"

Charlotte asked, but when she met her daughter's eyes, the girl was gone.

A few days later, Charlotte was sitting at the dining room table. She was eating grilled cheese, as it was lunch time, Isabella's favorite. Then, it happened again. Suddenly, Isabella was sitting across from Charlotte. The girl looked confused, then opened her mouth to say something---

Then, she was gone.

"Where are you, Isabella?" Charlotte murmured, standing up. Had she imagined it? Two times, she'd seen Isabella. Twice, she'd disappeared. "Why did you leave me?" Charlotte whispered, sitting back down, her appetite gone.

Two weeks later, it happened again. This time, for a longer amount of time.

Charlotte had been laying on her bed, in her room, thinking, again, about Isabella. School rumors she'd told her, crazy things she'd done with her friends. So many stories, so little time.



Isabella had done a lot, yet, for Charlotte, it seemed like it wasn't nearly enough. She'd been so young...

"What am I doing here?" Charlotte bolted upright when she heard the soft words. Before her stood Isabella.

"Isabella, you're back!" Charlotte exclaimed, then ran to hug her daughter--- but she went right through Isabella. Then, she started flickering in and out of sight. "No, Izzy, don't go!" But it was too late, for Isabella had disappeared. "No!" Charlotte burst into tears, unsure why. She'd lost Isabella before, thrice. However, she'd been so *close* to getting her daughter back...

There had to be a way.

So, Charlotte kept trying and trying, over and over again. She needed Isabella back and she'd do whatever it took. Isabella came multiple times, sometimes for a few seconds, other times for a few minutes. Yet, she was never solid and always transparent.

Year after year she kept trying. Oh, how cruel the world could be! Whenever Charlotte thought she'd succeeded, Isabella would disappear. Death seemed to have no mercy.

That was why, one day, Charlotte was sitting in the dining room. She'd just finished eating cake---red velvet, Isabella's favorite---and had decided to call for her daughter once more.

Every time she'd managed to bring her daughter back, even though it was only for a few minutes, she'd always ended up feeling completely drained. However, she was ready.

Charlotte took a deep breath. She could do this.

*No, I can't.*

"Shut up," she muttered to herself. "I can do this. For Izzy."

*But... Can I?* She thought nervously.

*Yes. I can.*

She was strong. She was determined. *I can do this*, she told herself, and she believed it.

She was going to bring back her daughter and she'd give her the long life she deserved. That was final.

Charlotte gathered all of her strength---she'd need it---and called for her daughter.

"Isabella!" The word simply echoed back to her.

She called again. "Izzy?"

Charlotte caught a flicker of movement from the corner of her eye. "Isabella?" She asked, turning to face it. There was Isabella, standing, at the bottom of the staircase. "Izzy!"

However, she soon started to flicker in and out of sight. However, Charlotte was determined. She wasn't losing her daughter again.

Fueled by adrenaline, she pictured Isabella as vividly as she could. She reached for her daughter, dismay filling her when she couldn't grasp her hands. She was so close... Yet so out of reach...

Memories filled Charlotte's mind, Isabella being the only thing in common. Happy, sad, angry memories. Everything they'd lived through together. Their past would fuel their future.

Charlotte wouldn't lose her daughter again.

She pictured a rope tying Isabella to the living word. Charlotte wouldn't have a ghost for a daughter--Isabella would be *alive*. Energy buzzed through her mind; she pictured it leaving her mind, surrounding Isabella. It was then that the girl stopped flickering. Her features---blonde hair and brown eyes---looked as they had once before, but her skin was still ghostly pale...

Charlotte stumbled, feeling completely drained. However, before she fell, Isabella caught her. Her skin was cold and rough, but it was solid. That was a start.

As Charlotte's vision started to dim, she heard her daughter's soft voice say into her ear, "I'm here, mom."

"Don't leave," Charlotte whispered back.

"I won't."

A few weeks later, Isabella started school. Charlotte felt proud of her daughter for not fighting her on it. She needed things to return to normal.

So, Charlotte was in the kitchen, making pancakes, for her daughter. She checked the time. "Isabella Rose Parker, you're going to be late for school!" she called. She set the table, making sure everything was absolutely perfect.

Suddenly, Isabella came into the kitchen through the door. However, she never opened the door, but walked *through* it. "Usually people open a door before stepping into a room,"

Charlotte laughed, then laughed even more when her daughter blushed and tried to form an excuse. Charlotte looked her daughter up and down. Gone was her beautiful blonde hair, replaced by light blue hair. She was a ghost.

However, it was okay. She was here, and that was all that mattered to Charlotte. "Try not to do that at school, okay?" Charlotte said, smiling.

"Okaaay," Isabella said, dragging out the word. She looked less than excited about starting school, but Charlotte knew it would be good for her. Soon, it was time for Isabella to leave. She muttered a quick, "Bye, mom," and started to get up.

"I'll see you after school, okay?" she told her daughter, who nodded, smiling. Charlotte hugged Isabella, as if it were the last time she'd get to do so. "I love you," she murmured.

"I love you too," Isabella replied, then pulled away and slipped into her winter jacket.

Then, she was gone, into the mysterious world of eighth grade. Charlotte watched her daughter walk down the road, blending in with the snowy trees. All was well, because Isabella was here.

Everything was finally back to normal.

Isabella was back.

## Third Place Fiction

Luna Landers, New London-KRHS

### *The Jake Patridge Effect*

#### *Tad*

Tad is just old enough to remember the start of The Program. He was only six, when it started. He's grown up with it, and heard the stories. Now that he's seventeen, he's ready to play.

Tad's older cousin, Jake, was sixteen at the beginning, and suspect to violent urges. He liked to throw Tad around, kick the dog, and play first-person shooter games in his bedroom. He was obsessed with snuff films. Sometimes, he would call to Tad playing in the living room:

*Come watch, this gangster is getting the lethal injection, Tad, come see, look at him squirm.* Jake would laugh and laugh, then send Tad back to play with his trucks. Tad's parents asked Jake to watch Tad often, when they had to work. They'd give him a fifty dollar bill, and Jake would buy subscriptions to illicit sites, and show the videos and pictures to Tad. Tad would cry sometimes, while watching, but other times he'd laugh with Jake, because he wanted to be grown-up too.

When Jake was not paying attention, which was more often than not, Tad would hide in the laundry room and try on Jake's clothes. He'd look in the mirror, swimming in denim and cotton, and wish that he could be as cool as Jake. Jake would buy Tad gummy bears every

Tuesday, because Jake had money to buy candy all the time. Jake had a girlfriend, and a job. Jake was everything Tad knew he needed to be when he grew up. That's what his parents always said, at least. *Jake never cries, Tad. You wouldn't want him to see you like this, would you?* and things to that effect ran circles around Tad's head. *Jakedoesyoudon'tjakeisyouaren'tjakedoes-*

One afternoon, Tad was putting together a puzzle in the den when Jake called him away.

*Come here, Taddy,* he called. *I have something you need to see.*

Tad was surprised, when he came to stand next to Jake at his desk, to see that his cousin had pulled up a popular website. Tad used the site to watch videos of monster trucks. He said as much to Jake. *That's great, Tad,* Jake replied. *Now watch this.*

Tad couldn't read, and so he didn't know the name of the video Jake played, but the man who appeared on the screen against a sterile backdrop looked a lot like Tad's school teacher, Mr Kissinger. The same type of person. The teacher, accountant, next door neighbor type. A plain, white man with gelled brown hair, and of uncertain age. Tad watched the man, face split open in a clownish grin, walking through the halls of a hospital-like building. He was saying things about 'advanced AI' and 'exciting opportunities for incarcerated men and women.' Tad missed a few words at the time, because he was only six, but the advertisement was shown everywhere for

years after. He'd practically memorized it.

The Smiling Man introduced a large, Hispanic man as David. David, he said, had perpetrated an attempted robbery earlier that year. Smiling Man nodded his head sympathetically.

David was looking for new opportunities to earn money for himself and his family, and be part of scientific leaps. David said none of this for himself, and, after Smiling Man finished introduction, David walked soberly to the left. The camera followed him as he strode towards a previously unseen hospital bed. He sat down, and a doctor and nurse walked in from off camera - both men, both bulky. The doctor held a syringe, the nurse held a box. The Smiling Man re-entered the frame with a video game controller. Much like the one Jake held in his hands, next to Tad. *Watch, and be amazed*, Smiling Man announced with a sweeping gesture.

The doctor took the box from the nurse, opened it, and procured a black vial. He showed it off to the camera. He then emptied the contents of the vial into his syringe. The nurse laid himself across David, holding him in place. David did not react to that, nor to the doctor sliding the needle into the vein of his forearm. Tad flinched at that. He never liked needles.

David laid absolutely still, and, after a few seconds, his eyes shut. *Now for the magic*, said the Smiling Man. He held his controller up to the camera. There were so many buttons, at least twenty, and he pressed one. On his bed, David shot his left arm up. His eyes stayed closed.

Next to Tad, Jake laughed.

The Smiling Man pressed another button, and David's other arm shot up. Then, a more complicated sequence, and suddenly David was off the bed, eyes still closed. He did a jig, and cartwheeled several times around the Smiling Man, who was focusing so intently on the controller that he wasn't smiling anymore. He looked older. Graver.

As quickly as he had begun, David stopped his spinning, returned to his bed, and laid back down. The Smiling Man grinned at the camera once more, flashing those pearly whites. A phone number flashed across the screen in red print. The ad ended. *Brilliant*, Jake had said, grinning.

Tad just nodded, and ran back to finish his puzzle.

←>←>←>←>

Now, Tad is seventeen, and Jake is dead. He has been for three years. His wife shot him, claimed self-defense, and went to jail anyway.

Tad believes Jake's wife. Not that he has ever admitted that. Around his parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles, he echoes their thoughts. *Kathy was a crazy bitch*, he says. *She killed our Jake, that bitch. She deserves to rot in prison, bitch.*

### *Kathy*

Kathy stares blankly up at the ceiling. Her head is starting to throb from resting so long on the concrete floor. She can move up onto her cot if she wants, but she's so tired. Her arms and legs ache from exertion, she is covered in scrapes and bruises, her bangs are matted to her face with blood, and



there is a particular pain between her knees that she is trying not to think about.

She can feel herself drifting. That's what she calls sleep, now, because her sleep is not sleep.

Before Jake, she slept so peacefully.

When she was with him, sleep was a respite, but every dream held a terror just beyond her sight, that appeared in vivid color when she woke up. Now, she doesn't sleep, really. Her eyes don't close, and she doesn't dream. She wakes up just as tired as when she drifted, and is simultaneously unable to rest more. She hates it here. Kathy's thoughts are interrupted by the loud creak of the sector gate opening. She doesn't shift at all, but listens closely to the approaching footsteps. She's gotten good at identifying the guards by the way they walk. Greg has a limp, *thud, shuffle, thud, shuffle*. Marcus is 275 pounds, and his ambling shakes the whole complex. Pam has all those keys, and they jingle with every step, Jada wears heels that *click~clack* on the cement, and Pierson makes absolutely no discernible noise. Like a cat. Kathy idly hopes that it's Pierson. The others are violent. Pierson's too cowardly to get physical.

It's not Pierson, though. It's Marcus. He's the meanest, he's physical, and delights in watching the women at the complex squirm. Kathy prays he walks past her.

He stops outside Kathy's cell. She doesn't move. Not even when he prods her through the cell bars with his steel-toe boot..

"Up, Griggs."

She doesn't respond. Fear courses through her as he opens the cell door. Her heart beats in her ears, and her fingers go numb.

"Griggs I know you heard me. Up."

Still, Kathy does not respond. She feels his breath hot on her neck as he leans over her.

"This can be hard, Griggs, or easy. Your choice."

She's confused. "What?"

"It's your turn, Griggs. Program guys are here. I can either stick you now, or in a comfy infirmary bed."

This provokes Kathy to action. She panics, flipping onto her stomach, pushing herself upright and scrambling to the corner of the cell. Hot tears and mucus fall down her face. "No, no, no, no stick no stick."

Marcus grunts, taking a step closer to her. "I said hard, or easy, Griggs. I got the nasty stuff, and the infirmary's got the nice stuff. Your choice."

"No no no stick. I just got stuck, I don't want to be stuck." Kathy whimpers. She would prefer it if Marcus beat her, or brought her to solitary, or just straight up shot her.

At the same time, though, she *craves* the infirmary stick, in much the same way a food-poisoned body craves food.

It is better, like Marcus said. Hurts less, for one, and she just wants it. It makes her floaty. Marcus's stick, she's learned, is painful, and forces her so roughly into her own mind that she just can't bear it.

"Don't you want that good feeling," Marcus rumbles, pulling a syringe from his pocket.

"From the infirmary stick?" Before Kathy can respond, Marcus lunges forward and plunges the syringe into Kathy's neck.

She screams, and falls to her knees, clutching the point of entry. It stings, then aches. She can feel the cold where the solution enters her. Almost immediately, her muscles clench. She can't move, and her thoughts are so, so heavy. Everything around her presses in like a weight, crushing her. Flattening her. All that she can see is Marcus, all she can smell is Marcus. She wants to scream, but she can't.

"It's such a shame we can't have controllers," Marcus mutters, leaning over her. "A damn shame."

Marcus reaches for his belt. He unbuckles it and slides it out of the loops.

"Your appointment isn't for another fifteen minutes, Kathy Bear. I was hoping you'd resist."

Tears continue to fall freely down Kathy's cheeks. She has no choice but to watch through damp eyes as Marcus lowers himself to her.

### *Tad*

Tad stares at the order form for Twill Women's Correctional Facility. He's looked at it so many times in the past weeks leading up to his birthday. Prior to that he browsed other facilities, other variations of The Program. Men's, women's, and juvenile facilities, inner city and remote, private and state. All that, to settle on Jake's wife's residence.

The order form has the barest, most basic information; User Name, Age, Date, Package. Date desired, Payment information. Terms and Conditions, Choose your Player. So few components. Like buying a pair of pants. *Easier* than buying a pair of pants.

Pants are not what Tad has on his screen. Women's faces appear and disappear as he scrolls. Mugshots and identification photos with names, ages, heights, and weights. Some white women, more Asian, even more Hispanic and Black women. Tattoos and no tattoos, bruises, cuts, freckles, scars, and burns. Some in prison orange, others in street clothes, or washed out in the DMV light of their driver's license pictures.

Tad knows what he's looking for in a player. Who he's looking for.

He doesn't even know for sure that she is in The Program. Officially, it is voluntary. If she never signed up, he won't find her here.

But he does. Fortunately for him, his eyes catch her name on the left before he scrolls past. He hovers over her image; unsmiling, with an old bruise on her cheek. Her mugshot. Kathy Griggs. F, Hispanic, age 23, 5'4". 129 lbs. Tad selects the checkbox in the corner of her picture.

Complete enrollment.

Confirm.

Transaction complete.

## *Kathy*

Marcus pushed Kathy to the infirmary in a wheelchair when he was finished with her, and she had to hear him tell the nurse that she was too anxious to make it to the infirmary. She has a fear of hospitals, he said. He had to stick her in the cell.

She couldn't cry out to object. *No, she wanted to scream. Don't make me do this. Listen to what he did to me.*

Now, she stares blankly ahead, listening to the ticking of the clock. Every tick of the clock is a hammer to her skull. Pounding. Drilling. She can see her brains leaking out the holes, like a Chia pet, with gray matter for hair.

A doctor walks in, clutching a controller in his hand. He has thick glasses, and the angle of the sun through the window reflects in the lenses. Kathy can't see his eyes. She wants to. She wants to look at him directly while he tests her. That way, maybe, he can see her accusation against him.

*Satan, she screams. I'm dead. Look at me, I'm dead.*

But, of course, he does not hear her.

"Ms. Griggs, I'm Dr Winchester. Thank you for your participation. I will be attaching some wireless monitors to you to collect data for our research, to show us your heart, blood, and brain activity. This shouldn't hurt a bit."

Kathy seethes. The script. The stupid script. She'd been mobile the first time she'd heard it. When she'd been desperate for money, a change of scenery.

Dr. Winchester sticks pads with needles all over her. Her chest, stomach, wrist, neck, head, back. He uses the controller as he works, forcing her to turn against her will, her own dead weight straining her muscles. They cry out against the pressure. When Dr. Winchester finishes, he walks around to hold the handles of her bed. The bed moves. He pushes her forward, out the double hospital doors, down a hallway, through another set of double doors. She's uncomfortably dizzy from the twists and turns when he pushes her into the play room. Renewed terror ignites in Kathy when she sees the Player. *Or, the Controller? Is she the Player?*

*Who gives a shit either way?*

The Player looks so much like Jake.

*Jake the rat bastard, the devil.*

*No, no. Jake the kind. He was so patient with her.*

Kathy wants to smack herself. *Bad Kathy.* What Jake was or wasn't is irrelevant. This is not Jake, but he resembles him so closely.

Jake and this Player will circle the edge of her drifting tonight, and tomorrow. Every pained movement in her cell later will come with this face; pale, washed out, acne-spotted, with stringy brown hair and a hook nose. The Partridge nose, said Jake. Jake Partridge. This face is going to be plastered on her eyelids.

*Tad*

Kathy. That's her.

He met her only occasionally before today. She would be with Jake while Tad was being babysat, sometimes. They'd leave Tad in front of the TV and go into Jake's room to 'play.' He'd hear them sometimes. Kathy's screams of happiness or terror, Jake yelling. Tad could hardly ever tell if they both were enjoying it, especially because Kathy was always so sickly looking. So unhappy. Thin, gray, hunched over. Beautiful once, no doubt. But not then. Not with Jake.

Not here, either. Her hair is clumped and matted, different lengths. Bruises mar her neck, arms, and face, like she's been grabbed at. The image of a strange man, or Jake, perhaps, grabbing Kathy in such a way almost stirs something in Tad. But not quite.

The doctor who brought Kathy in is talking to Tad. Safety rules, emergency calling, limits and expectations. But Tad is not listening. No. He's watching Kathy. She isn't moving, hasn't moved, but when he meets her eyes he sees such intense fear and hatred, he shudders.

The doctor leaves, and Tad is alone with Kathy.

## *Kathy*

Tad. That's the boy's name, she hears the doctor say. He isn't more than seventeen, and Kathy knows him. Jake's cousin. The timid boy with puzzles and the trucks, who watched porn with Jake, and never told anyone what Jake was doing to Kathy. He looks at Kathy so intensely.

He says nothing, and fiddles with a few buttons on the controller. Her fingers twitch, her neck flips back and forth, and her right arm shoots into the air at an uncomfortable angle. Tears well in her eyes. Tad looks back up at her. Direct eye contact, so he must see the tears.

*Please stop, Tad. Mercy. Please.*

Tad smiles, and her shoulder twists more tightly.

As that's happening, her legs pull her up from the bed. She jumps up, down, up down, while her arms spin in circles, dislocating. She cries, silently. Tears drip down her face while her expression remains smooth and placid. It hurts. She wants to stop, to resist. Tad stares in awe, gaze flicking between her chest and her eyes.

*Why didn't I cooperate with Marcus? Maybe he wouldn't have pricked me. Maybe I would have gotten the infirmarium stick, with the cocktail of drugs that makes me see sugarplum fairies and drift so peacefully from my body. Away from the cracking of bones, and tearing of muscles.*

This is her fault.

She sees Jake's smile on Tad's face. Hears his voice so clearly, like he's right there with her.

*It's for your own good.*



## *Tad*

Tad continues on with Kathy for approximately ten minutes. He chases Feeling. It's at the edges of his mind, his body, he knows it. When he catches an emotion, it's lust. He holds it, devours it, and when he's done, he drops the controller on the ground. Kathy crumbles, limbs twisted obscenely, and Tad knows he's broken the Terms and Conditions. So, he walks calmly across the room, and presses the emergency aid button. He starts yelling.

“Help, I couldn't stop the controller, too many buttons at once, Oh God she's hurt, somebody help, anybody...”

He pinches his arm, enough to draw blood, and tears come to his eyes. Doctors and guards rush into the room.

“Help her, please, it was an accident.” Tad pleads.

Tad sees this all as though it's a movie. There he is, the devastated hero, who's made a fatal mistake. The heroine lies bloodied on the ground, while side characters, nameless, faceless extras rush in to save her.

When Kathy is taken away - alive or dead, he doesn't know - the doctor who brought her to Tad comforts him.

“It's alright, son. Accidents happen.” Then the doctor escorts him to the front desk.

Tad makes sure the tears stay until he leaves the facility. Once he's past the door, he wipes them on his sweatshirt sleeve.

As he gets into his car, he thinks back to the Kathy he knew with Jake. So meek, and powerless next to Jake. She had to kill Jake. Of course she did.

Tad wishes he had killed Jake, but he couldn't. Kathy did first. So Tad had to kill Kathy. To get back at Jake, of course. She was His Kathy. If she was gone, Jake would be so mad. But Kathy was good, and she killed Jake. Tad hurt her. Maybe she dies, maybe not. Maybe Tad gets back at Jake, maybe not. Hard to decide. Tad feels better by the time he pulls into his driveway.

His mom asks him what he wants for dinner when he walks through the door.

Hamburgers, maybe. Jake's favorite.

He's feeling sentimental.

## First Place Non-Fiction

Jenna Carson, Sunapee-Sunapee High School

### *The Checks and Balances of Society and Progress*

*“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. And to the republic, for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for All.”*

As a reader, you probably skipped over the rest of that sentence after you read “I pledge allegiance to the flag.” You knew what the rest of the poem was.

If you went to elementary school in the U.S., I know that you know the pledge—probably by heart, by now. It has become a provision, a sort of formality. A duty, if you will. But do you *really* know the pledge?

You were most likely taught the pledge when you were 5 years old, on your first day of Kindergarten. But at least from my perspective, I remember being more focused on remembering what the next word was, in contrast with actually understanding what I was saying. I mean, in retrospect, I was only 5. And if I’m being honest, I don’t think I could actually spell allegiance back then.

But anyhow, allegiance is defined as faithfulness to something to which one is bound by pledge or duty. Your “duty” is expected to be

committed, dedicated and loyal to your government. When we pledge our allegiance to not only just the American flag, but our republic, we are promising to act on our rights as citizens—To uphold the principles and duties of the American government. So what are the principles of the American government?

Well, when in the preamble of the American constitution, it says the establishment in the first place was “to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity...” In other words, the constitution was established to create laws surrounding the ideas of justice, peace, defense, welfare, liberty, and prosperity.

So with these ideas in place, we allowed the Constitution of the United States to uphold the American government. It is the law of the land, and every law made, every action has to be in accordance with the Constitution. The Constitution contains the supreme laws, setups and objectives surrounding the government. It sets the stage for the judicial, legislative and executive branch. It is based on the ideas of republicanism, checks and balances, separation of powers, and popular sovereignty, all of which are institutions that guarantee little abuse of power and allow for each of the branches to balance each other out.

The idea of separation of powers and checks and balances is that, despite the authority that the Constitution gives the people with the concept of popular sovereignty, the government can sort of “check” its balance with its citizens. Despite this power “resting with the people”, citizens still have obligations that they have no power over. The government justifiably needs reinforcements in order to successfully have any authority over its people. That being the case, these four obligations are: 1. If summoned, you must serve on jury duty. 2. If you are a male over the age of 18, you must register with the Selective Service, in case a draft is necessary 3. You must pay taxes 4. You must obey the law of the land. The Constitution. These are the standard rules that all Americans have to abide by. However, when you are pledging your allegiance, these aren't the only provisions you are following, or at least should be. Henceforth, citizens also have certain unrequired responsibilities: voting, staying informed, being involved in your community, practicing tolerance towards other people's opinions. These involuntary actions are the key points to citizen involvement in the United States as a whole, and although these actions are not specifically outlined in the Constitution, the essence and relevance of the Constitution must be sustained through these involuntary actions. Therefore, electing representatives, voicing your opinions, and creating change in the government is really what makes a citizen “loyal” to the Constitution.

The preeminent idea here is that these thought processes surrounding the Constitution are almost crafted to allow for overwhelming participation and action by citizens. After all, the preamble of the Constitution starts with “We the People of the United States”, which is practically popular sovereignty in itself—it’s the idea that American citizens created this government, which therefore gives them the ultimate power. At the end of the day, the American government is conjecturally, “Of the people, by the people, and for the people”. And, checks and balances are not necessarily only for the judicial, legislative and executive branches. With these groundwork concepts in place, it practically authorizes the citizens of the United States to almost “check” the balance of power between their central government and the authority that they have over it. Checks and balances the groundwork concept that puts citizens on the platform to create change.

And we can observe that change has been evidently made in our government. There have been 17 amendments made to the Constitution since 1789, disregarding the Bill of Rights. Particularly, the 19th amendment was ratified on June 4th, 1919. This amendment formally gave American women the right to vote. Ironically, if you can think back to when the Statue of Liberty was dedicated by former President Grover Cleveland in 1886, you’ll see that this occurred well before 1919. Cleveland placed a dazzling symbol of our country that promoted liberty

and freedom and American greatness in front of all of American society, and the world, if anything. But if you were there when the Statue of Liberty was officially dedicated, and for just a moment, you glanced at the water, you would've seen women's rights leader Lillie Blake and 200 other women sail by on a boat. They were holding a sign that said, "American women have no liberty."

But wait, isn't the main idea surrounding the founding of the Constitution "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" which the Founding Fathers claimed was the entire idea of government as a whole? They were not being given the essence of their citizenship. If women were considered American citizens and make up half the population, why weren't they granted the right to vote?

But as I said, the 19th amendment was eventually ratified. Women were given the right to vote. They were led by Lucy Burns to hold signs outside of the White House, they had gathered at Seneca Falls to draft a list of grievances against the government. They were performing citizen actions and making change—an obligation that they truly have towards the Constitution.

Not to mention, African Americans were not initially included in their rights to "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" in the slightest. They were tied down by the horrific character of slavery, and for so long, had to bear the burden of that horrific

establishment. But by the 1960s, when racial discrimination was still terrifyingly active, leaders such as Malcolm X, Rosa Parks and Ella Baker spawned a movement for equality. They stood in front of MLK at the Lincoln Memorial and heard him speak on behalf of the injustice that African Americans were experiencing, every day. They were checking their balances. They were ensuring that the “balance” between their livelihoods and the government were translating.

As John F. Kennedy once said, who was the U.S. president for a majority of the Civil Rights Movement, “Without debate, without criticism no administration can succeed and no republic can survive.”

Think about our government like a puzzle—imagine you have all of these pieces that fit together in one little union. If our puzzle piece isn’t fitting together, sometimes we have to stretch or break our puzzle pieces. And then, the rest of our puzzle is unbalanced and we therefore have to change and manipulate the other pieces to make it all fit together. And, we can’t simply leave a puzzle piece out—or else the puzzle isn’t complete. Sometimes there’s new ideas or new puzzle pieces and we’ll try to fit it in. But that’s the reality of the government. It’s all about experimentation and trial and error.

Therefore, at least in terms of the Constitution, it wasn’t initially crafted in the best interests of equality



for all. Our puzzle wasn't perfect. But as I've been saying, citizen action has almost checked the balance between the federal government. We've adjusted our puzzle pieces. Citizen action as shown through these examples allowed the Constitution to further embrace its founding principles: "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness". The truth is, our republic has thrived off of criticism. We have thrived off of change and growth and accountability as demonstrated in the women's rights or civil rights movements. We have made 17 amendments to our constitution. Over 30,000 statues have been enacted since the Constitution was ratified. We have changed and grown. And it's because our Constitution gives us the right to do so.

Therefore a part of citizen responsibilities is without a doubt ensuring that your country is upholding the principles they pride themselves upon. If the United States puts itself on a platform of "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" or "Liberty and Justice for All", then as a citizen of the United States, you should hold your government accountable if they are not actively meeting these standards.

In closing, Loyalty or "allegiance" to your country should not mean standing by your government through thick and thin, it should mean doing everything you can to improve it. If you are being loyal to your Constitution or government, then you are practicing the principles of the Constitution, of popular sovereignty, separation of powers and truly, of checks and balances. You are

using what your Constitution grants you—your rights of speech, press, petition and assembly. You are being a *citizen*. This is your obligation—to have a voice. Change is what makes someone or something truly American. Our current Congress, the 117th Congress, has enacted 213 laws since January of 2021. As John Gardner once said, “Democracy is not measured by its leaders doing extraordinary things, but its citizens doing extraordinary things.” And although change has been made, the United States of America should never be freed from the nature of change. That’s what we’re crafted for. There is still much work to do, and no puzzle will ever be perfect. And most of all, I encourage all of you in the audience, young or old, big or small, to use the platform of the Constitution. They can’t tell you can’t protest. If you want change, make change. So the next time you stand up, look at the flag and recite your pledge, remember what you are truly pledging. Thank you.



**“Enriching lives and building community through the arts.”**

**How do we do this?**

**Enrich:**

- Showcasing existing arts organizations and artists through our *First Fridays* Programs and Arts Shows throughout the year
- Offering creative educational opportunities for adults and students

**Support:**

- Offering scholarship opportunities for students and grants for teachers
- Providing venues, visibility, and opportunities for arts organizations and artists of all disciplines
- Providing opportunities for creative individuals to gather and collaborate
- Providing community events that stimulate the local and broader economy

**Promote:**

- Publicizing cultural events on our monthly e-calendar, website, in print and other media
- Creating opportunities for wider visibility for arts organizations and artists of all disciplines
- Creating collaborative opportunities with businesses, educational Institutions, community organizations and the towns in which we serve.

[www.centerfortheartsnh.org](http://www.centerfortheartsnh.org)

[info@cfanh.org](mailto:info@cfanh.org)

**Visual Arts, Literary Arts, Performing Arts, Youth Programs,  
Scholarships, Teacher Grants, and Community Services.**

**Find out More!**

