

*Our Patches,
Our Stories*

Fay Zhao

*Dedicated to
the next generation of innovators and storytellers*

*Made possible by
Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida
Bank of America of Central Florida*



BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS
OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

BANK OF AMERICA



FOREWORD

By Fay Zhao

This summer, I was selected as a Bank of America Student Leader. As with the program, I was partnered with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida — specifically the Levy Hughes Clubhouse — to spend my summer interning and learning about this organization.

I vividly remember my first meeting with Levy Hughes Clubhouse's Senior Service Director, Ms. Tasha Robinson-Banks. In our conversation, she gave me a piece of advice that stuck with me. Her advice was simple: *be present.*

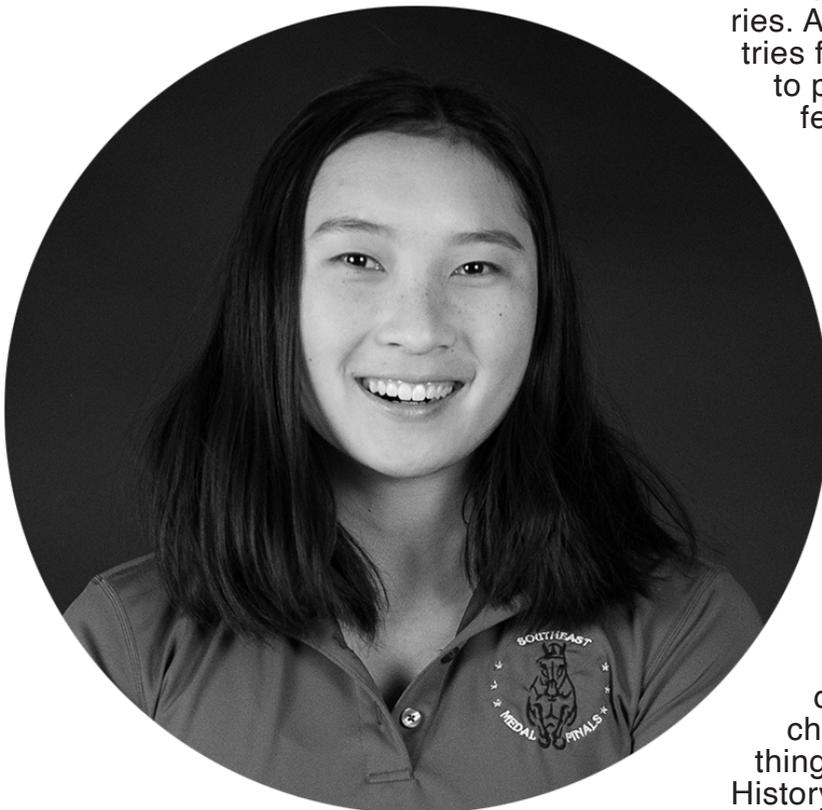
Especially at this age, when ideas are blooming and dreams are catching, it is easy to only see the big bright future ahead

and all the goals and finish lines to be crossed. But while that was happening, I realized that I was missing out on what was right in front of me, the people who I am helping, the current needs to be supported, and the stories of those around me. Ultimately, my role this summer is for the kids at Levy Hughes Clubhouse. But Ms. Tasha's advice was more than just enjoying the moment, it was about staying focused and creating impact in the present — then inspiring the future with a legacy rooted in community, while remembering the people who took part in shaping it. So, here is the legacy of the students at the Levy Hughes Clubhouse Boys & Girls Clubs in the summer of 2025: *Our Patches, Our Stories.*

The idea originated from my love of stories. As a person who has lived in two countries for exactly half of my life, I have talked to people from all over the world in different walks of life. Each story uniquely captures the essence of that person — their personality, heritage, and values — yet they are all united by community, passions and interests, dreams and aspirations, struggles and hardships.

More often than not, stories are told about us, from the outside looking in. But what about the stories we want to tell?

So over the 8-week period of this summer, I worked with eleven students to tell their stories and represent it through designing their own patch. You might be wondering why patches? Because patches are personalized, carefully decorated, and placed on our most cherished clothing, tote bags, or anything we use to proudly show who we are. History is defined by patches; from medieval



BGCCF Authors

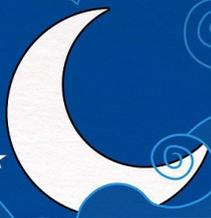
family crests to rank-identifying insignias, these patches provide an insight into a person through different styles whether that be realism or symbolism.

Above all, patches patch. They patch over the holes of things that are necessary for us. While we might not think they are important, there is no grocery to be brought home if your mother's grocery tote has a gigantic hole, or no going outside if your pants are ripped. Similar to our lives, we are always focused on other things, other issues, other people, other dreams. Yes, we focus on who we want to be in the future, what we want to accomplish, what could happen to us, but we often forget who we are in the context of the past and the present. Like those grocery bags, we tend to think they are unimportant until something happens, and we lose track of what exactly we were fighting for, or what truly mattered.

As with the common saying "forgive and forget," it is easy to live life only highlighting the positive peaks, but slowly our narrative becomes flat, and we become nothing more than glorified versions of ourselves. But as multi-faceted human beings, there is no such thing as a perfect self. So these patches find the holes in our narratives of what we left behind or thought unimportant and fill them by remembering and recognizing.

In this book, you will find patches and stories of these eleven students told from their own perspective, in the way they choose. While some might be stories told in the third person, others might be a detailed account of a passion, all are united by the goal of these brilliant students to create a legacy, capturing their current selves in the summer of 2025, shaped by the past and inspired by the future.

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ERIC

Hi, my name is Eric, and I am 12 years old! My patch contains three things that are important to me: astronomy, soccer, and Wing Chun.

First up, astronomy. My dream job is to be an astronomer. I love space and want to study the Great Beyond when I get older. I discovered I had a passion for space when I met a friend named Kelvin – he is really into exo-planets. That is when I started looking them up and finding explanations about each and every planet.

Looking these things up piqued my interest as I found out really cool things about space, such as

nebulae and distant galaxies!

One of my favorites is called

NGC 6543,

commonly known as the Cat's Eye nebula! It is around 3,000 light years away from Earth which would take around 28 billion years to get there!

It is always fun to learn something new, but it is more



One piece of advice I have is (I know people say this a lot but here goes): Be Positive! Even in your darkest moments be positive, and even when you feel that things couldn't be worse, look for the good in all things!



fun when it is about space! Whenever I am in the car on the way to a soccer game, I would always pull out a book about astronomy to calm my pre-game jitters.

On that note, soccer is on my patch because it is my favorite sport (my favorite position is right defense). Last year, I played on Team Fire, and we were the best team in the league! I started soccer because I heard my friend, Samarah, was starting. So, I joined the team and began to love soccer! One fun tradition we had on Team Fire was that if we are undefeated in our game then we all play up! No defense, no goalie, just chaos! The first time we did it we only gave up two goals. We still ended up winning that game though! A challenge we had was when we played the best team in the league, Crew. We did not have our best player or our goalie, and it was sweltering hot outside. We ended in a 6-6 tie after a well-fought battle.

My friend ended up randomly quitting after the very first game, which was kinda crazy, but I am glad I stayed on the team because I made new friends! Soccer helps me calm down even if the game can be a bit hectic sometimes, it always helps me



get my thoughts together! From soccer I learned to never give up, give your all, and never slow down until we are at home!

Now, we have Wing-Chun. Wing-Chun is a fighting style originating from Southern China designed for self-defense. My dad and my grandfather practiced it so now it is a family tradition. The chain started with my grandfather who practiced it for 50 years then passed it on to my dad who won his first tournament at 12 years old (my age now). Fun fact now my grandfather teaches me! They feel it is important to carry on the tradition. Even though doing it is not my biggest passion, I carry on because it can be fun.

MY PATCH





CELINA



Hi, I am Celina. I am from Angola, and now I live in the United States of America with my family. I am 16, and today I am going to tell my story in the third person.

Celina, a 14-year-old girl, lived in a simple city, in a small brick house with her parents and her four siblings. Life was hard. Money barely covered the rent, but Celina had something no one could take from her: joy.

She was happy in a way that was contagious. Whenever she laughed, everyone around her laughed too. And she was kind even to people who were mean to her. But there were two things everyone knew about her: she loved doing hairstyles, and she didn't like being bossed around.

Her father, José, worked as a bricklayer during the day and did odd jobs at night. Her mother, Fátima, washed clothes for neighbors and sold homemade popsicles. They had one goal in mind: to give Celina and her four siblings a life different from the one they had lived.

From a young age, Celina and her siblings would hear their parents talk about a distant place, the United States of America, where they said there were more opportuni-

“Never forget where you came from. Not to cling to the past, but to keep your feet on the ground. True wealth is not only in what you have achieved, but in who you have become along the way. Use your story as strength, and your success as a bridge to lift others up.”



ties, better schools, and more safety. They didn't dream of wealth. They dreamed of dignity and hope.

For years, her parents saved every penny. They gave up everything—new clothes, parties, even medical treatments they needed. Every time they thought about giving up, they looked at their children and remembered why they were doing it.

When Celina turned 16, the impossible happened. Through a lot of hard work and the help of friends, the family managed to gather enough money for visas and plane tickets. Saying goodbye to their town was painful, but it was full of hope.

In the United States, life wasn't easy at first. They lived in a small rented apartment and worked long hours to get by. Celina's father became a supermarket security guard, and her mother worked in hotels. Celina, despite struggling with the language, was dedicated to her studies.

Over time, things started to improve. Celina learned English quickly, made friends, and began to stand out at school. Her teachers saw some-





scan for original
Portuguese version

thing special in her—a rare determination shaped by hardship.

Years later, Celina was the second in her family to attend a university. She studied on a full scholarship and graduated in Petroleum Engineering. She never forgot her roots and, whenever she could, shared her story to inspire other children.

In the end, what her parents did was more than just moving to another country. They planted a seed of hope. And Celina made it blossom.

“Patch” is an English word that means a mending or correction, and its meaning varies depending on the context.

I used this structure because I wanted to show how events from the past influenced the characters’ present. This setup allows the reader to gradually piece the puzzle together, creating deeper engagement in the narrative.

At the beginning of the story, everything is true. But when it comes to the part about getting a scholarship, that part is not true—because I am not in university yet. I am still in high school. I am simply imagining my future.

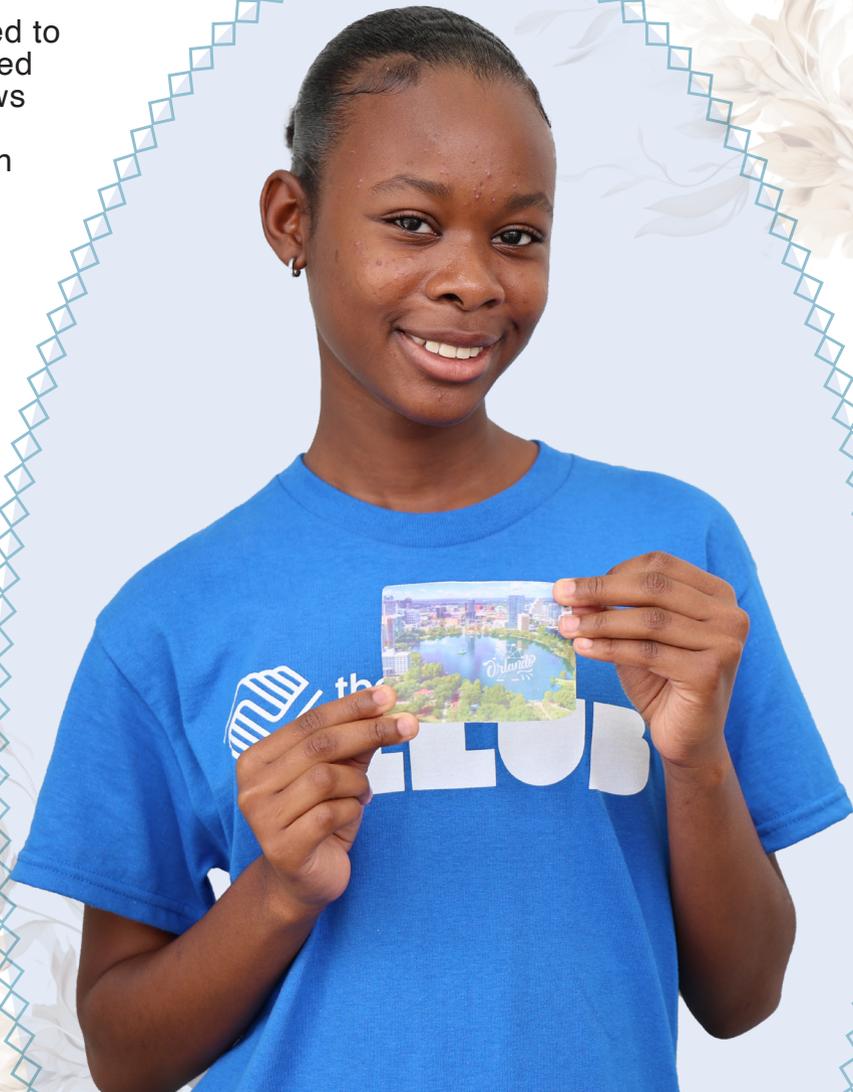
I want to study Petroleum Engineering because I am really interested in understanding how the processes of extraction, production, and use of energy resources work. I have always been drawn to the hard sciences, especially physics and chemistry. I see this field as a way to apply that knowledge to solve real and complex problems.

In addition, I know that energy is still a fundamental foundation for global development. I want to be part of that transformation, seeking increasingly efficient and sustainable solutions for the sector.

My advice is: Never forget where you came from. Not to cling to the

past, but to keep your feet on the ground. True wealth isn’t only in what you have achieved, but in who you have become along the way. Use your story as strength, and your success as a bridge to lift others up.”

As Dom Pedro once said: “I didn’t inherit wealth, but I will leave an empire.”



WAKINYAN



Hi, I am Wakinyan, and I am 13 years old. I have been adopted for about three years. Before that, I had a lot of trouble in my life. My grandma was very ill and passed away. After that, my mom struggled and made a lot of bad choices. Because of everything we went through, I lost my first language. I had to cut my hair because I could not take care of it. Then, we lost our home. I could name more things that happened, but I won't.

I did not know I was Native American until about six years ago, when I was taken into foster care. After I was adopted, I met my grandfather for the first time. He told me the story of my past and helped me learn more about who I am. One of the things that helped me a lot was *The Lakota Way*, a book about the Native American way of life. My grandpa helped explain what it all meant. The book talked about the Native American population and how they were taken away long ago. It

helped me understand that even though they were taken away, they found their way through hard times. It inspired me and showed me that I could manage too.

When I joined my adopted family, life got better. At first, I was angry and broke things. But talking to my biological dad helped me feel better. I became very interested in my Lakota heritage. My name means Thunder Spirit. I go to powwows with my dad, where I compete in grass dancing. I even earned third place once and won a gift card!

I am passionate about computers. When I was younger, I spent a lot of time at the library trying out gadgets and learning about technology. Now, I can take apart a computer and put it back together again all in one day. I even built my own website about how coffee affects people with ADHD (as I was curious since I have ADHD too).

For my patch, I designed a medicine dreamcatcher representing my heritage. Long ago, dreamcatchers were hung over beds to catch bad dreams. On it, the words "mith Wičówoyake" is the Lakota phrase for "my story." The black frame represents my love for coding and computers.





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One piece of advice I have for people living on the street (or anyone in general) is: do not give up. When I was seven, I was living on the street with my mom because we did not have enough money for a home. It was very hard, but I did not give up. I kept going and found more of everything.

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Watching videos and movies surrounded by horror and gore never scared me, it always gave me a bit of excitement and or interest to see more.

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been an interesting topic for me to learn about because of how many layers it has. Some of the things I found were shocking but fascinating. I learned that torture has been around for over 7,000 years. Just thinking about how far back that goes shows how long humans have been using it as punishment. Compared to today, those methods were way more intense and inhumane. But that's also what makes it so interesting — it is like a reflection of how far people would go when they had power. Through my research, I started to realize how cruel people can really be. Sometimes, it feels like people in control don't even care about others' lives — it's more about control than anything else.

If I never had the dream of becoming a surgeon, being in the FBI or an investigator would definitely be my top option as a career. Thanks to these movies and research in this genre, I have the ability to handle blood and bodily fluids which is a great help in this field!

EMMANUEL



Hi, my name is Emmanuel, and I am 15 years old. Today I will be telling you about my passion for basketball.

I have been playing basketball since the 5th grade. I did not take it seriously until the 6th grade when I started training and doing more basketball drills where I became more interested. Then, I started asking my family members if they could train me. I like the teamwork and the physical part of the game. One person that took up training me was my uncle. He pushes me to do drills like up and down and all-outs. I look up to him because he trained me to be the person I am today. He works all the time but always is active and ready to go.

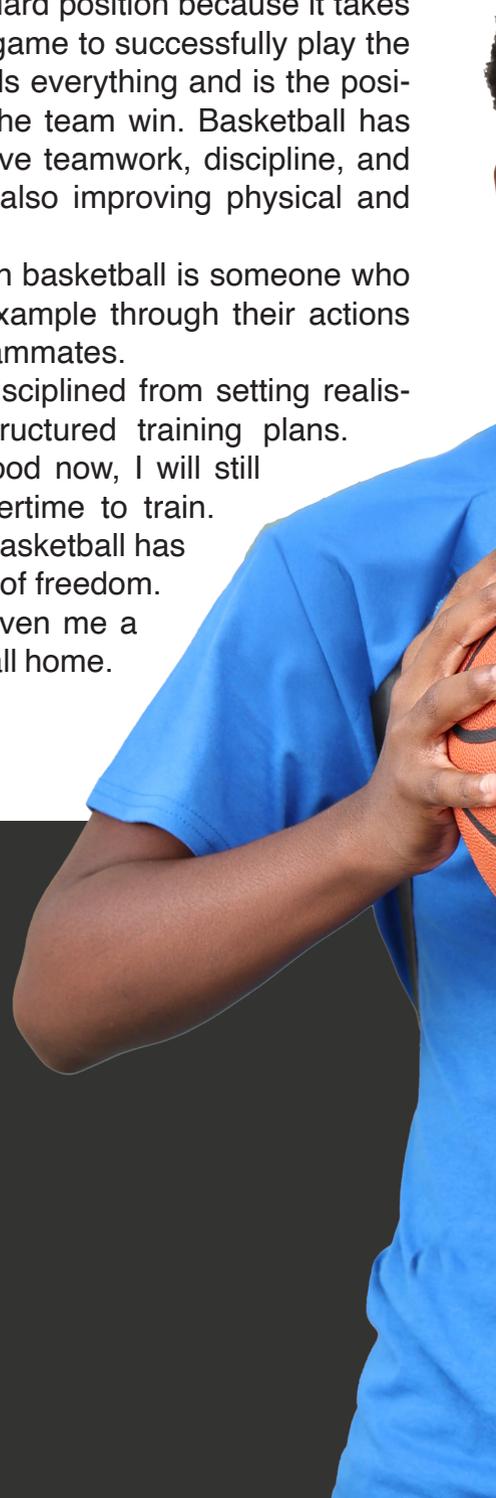
I train about every day except on the weekend where I go to church. The drills make me a better player because of the work I put into it. My favorite drill is up and downs because it works everything in your body.

From practice, I learned that you can do anything you put your mind to as I try and try and I

mess up but I keep trying over and over again. I play the point guard position because it takes a lot of IQ in the game to successfully play the position. It controls everything and is the position that makes the team win. Basketball has shaped me to have teamwork, discipline, and leadership while also improving physical and mental skills.

A good leader in basketball is someone who sets a positive example through their actions and motivates teammates.

I grew more disciplined from setting realistic goals and structured training plans. Although I am good now, I will still keep working overtime to train. When I am mad basketball has given me a place of freedom. Basketball has given me a place that I can call home.





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Basketball has given me a place of freedom. Basketball has given me a place that I can call home.

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ADRIANA



Hi, I am Adriana Taylor, and I am writing about a 15-year-old girl. She wants to become a writer but does not know what to write about. She goes through life struggles, but not as a normal 15 year old would. She struggles with depression, anxiety, depression, and ADHD. Her parents separated when she was eight, and her father is coming back into her life trying to be a “better father.” She fights all these feelings and emotions all at one time. She sooner or later realizes that doing that brings her down into difficult outcomes. She later comes to the realization that she is the best, and she finds the help that she needs, with the help of her mother and half her family cheering her on. She becomes successful because she believes that if she does better, she deserves better. She believes that everyone has dreams, and everyone can succeed in those dreams as long as they put their mind to it.

There is a girl named Nova. People may say she is kind, funny, sweet, caring, and loud because maybe they say “hi” to each other in the hallways or eat lunch with each other once in a blue moon. The people that know her deeper may say she is passionate, deep, creative, and spiritual. That is because she shows them what they want to see and the person that they want to befriend. If you ask her herself, she may say these things too, but on a deeper level? She is broken, hurt, lost. She is trying to find her way through the storm that she and everyone else put on her. The storm that everyone else cannot see is hurting her. She has been through so much in the past five years that it hurts to talk about it. A storm that she feels nobody will understand. The things that she processes in her head — nobody will recognize that she needs to talk to somebody. She realizes and sees everything, even if it is not the things people want her to know or hear. She knows that if she does something, the reaction will either be wrong or right. She knows that everyone does not need a reaction or response from her. She knows that when she is mad, certain actions are not necessary. She just needs to talk. Not somebody that is going to

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My patches represent how mental illnesses can make people believe they are not worthy or enough, or they do not do enough. Everyone is enough whether they like it or not. Everyone has passions and dreams, and everyone will accomplish those dreams by believing. You can accomplish anything you want in life, you just have to put your mind and faith into it.

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respond every single time she tries to talk, or someone she feels is going to give the advice she did not want. What she wants is somebody to sit and listen to her. If you sit and listen to her, you may say she needs therapy. She knows it. She tried it. Maybe it works? She does not really know. She wishes she can be free from all of the pain in her heart and run away from the overthinking in her head. She wishes she could run away from it all, but she cannot, even if she wanted to, because she cares too much about everyone. About her mom, her family, her friends, everyone.

She is diagnosed with ADHD, anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorder. Some people may say all those things combined are very dangerous. Some may say “it’s an experience.” Some may say it is fun. To Nova? It is a nightmare. Every time she turns around, she is arguing with somebody or crying because of somebody. She rarely gets to be happy when she wants to be happy. She is always sad. She never knows why. She never knows the reason. She tried and tried and found... nothing. Like there is no reason she is mad or sad... she is just that.

Sooner or later, she realizes she can beat her anxiety and depression. She learns that she can control herself in moments that need controlling. She learns that not everything in life is bad. That she can have more happiness than anger. She doesn’t always have to be sad or mad, and if she is, she learns that she talks to somebody like her mom and stepmom.

She now knows that she is worthy of everything she gets and deserves the world within. She knows that everyone loves her. Now, she wants to help the rest of the world and the people who struggle with the diagnosis she has. But deep down inside, did anyone think it was me?

UNIQUE

My name is Unique Breckenridge, I am 16 years old. My patch is about my favorite show called "Stranger Things." From the creatures to the dark lighting, I love the visuals of this show. I am a big horror fan and anything science fiction so the designs and suspense of what happens next keeps me interested. My favorite characters are: Eleven, Nancy Wheeler, Max Mayfield, Erica Sinclair, Jim Hopper, Steve Harrington, Eddie Munson. My favorite scene of this show is when Eleven closes the gate and defeats the mind flayer.

One theme I really enjoyed was the community aspect of this strange world. In the show, everyone rallies around the character Will as he is affected by the upside down.

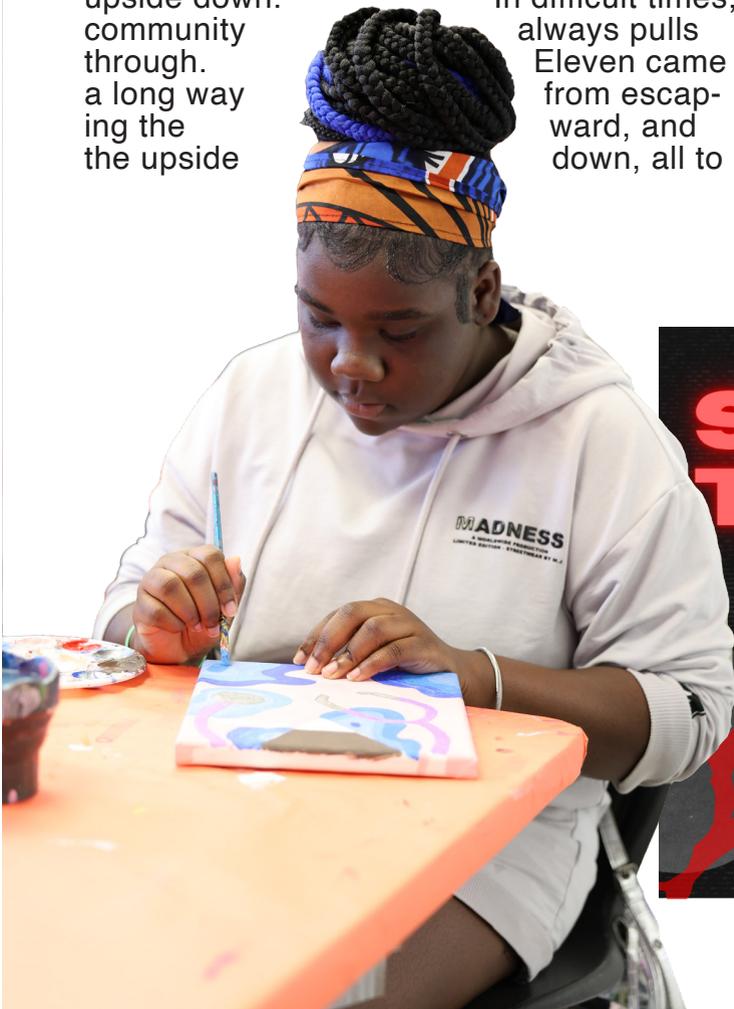
community through a long way ing the the upside

In difficult times, always pulls Eleven came from escap- ward, and down, all to

come back to her friends and family. I am inspired by her because of her bravery and her protection over her community.

From this show, I learned about the power of the community and that friends will always have your back. My community consists of my brother Emmanuel, older cousin William who we live with, and my auntie Inez. Most of my life, I lived with my great grandma until she passed last August. That is where I moved in with my auntie then to my cousin. The move was rough because we moved on the exact month of my grand- ma's birthday. It was difficult because I used to be a little stubborn and still grieiveing while also having to adjust to different types of parenting.

Throughout all the changes, I found my support through school where I had my friends to reach out to and take wherever I go. I believe in supporting each other, I support them and they support me. My commu- nity gives me advice, talks to me, tells me right from wrong.



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With all that, it is the community that I enjoy watching in shows where I can see their everyday life and different dynamics.

Through these shows, everyday is new, and I see the things that happen even though you never expected that it may happen. Seeing those people inspires me to accomplish anything I put my mind to. I often watch these shows while doing art (I am very good at multitasking). It is calming because when times are rough, it lets me focus on something instead of what is going around.

My advice for people is stranger danger — just kidding, it is listen to your family even though you don't want to because they might offer some insight.



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Spanish version

GABRIEL

Hi, I am Gabriel, and I am 13 years old. I am from the Dominican Republic, and my dream is to become a technology engineer because I have something in me that allows me to learn anything I need to use my hands for — like fixing machines or installing electric chair lifts.

Today, I want to explain what real cars are. Maybe you know more than I do about cars, but 78% of people think cars are just a common mode of transportation — and that is not true. Yes, cars are transportation, but they are also in your blood. You are probably thinking, “Is this guy crazy right now?” But I am not. Before, we wanted futuristic cars, but now, we want to go back to the past.

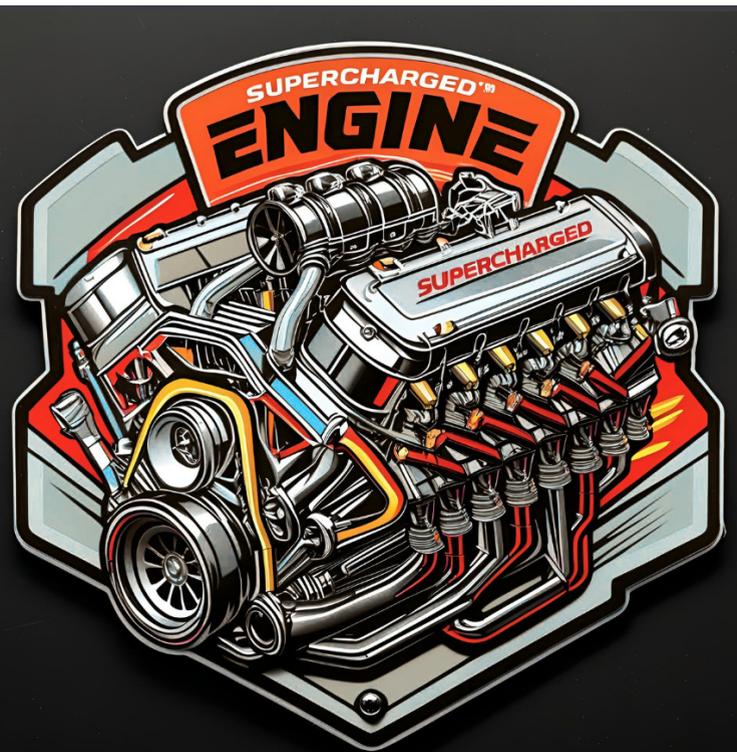
Back in 1978, a street demon was born: the Toyota Supra. The Supra may look like a simple car on the outside, but it hides a devilish engine. Just imagine a Supra with a V8 engine, two turbos, and about three nitrous bottles. Three is a lot! With just one bottle of nitrous, a car like that — fully

modified — can reach speeds of up to 400 kilometers per hour. It can go from 0 to 100 in just 7 seconds. Yes, in just 7 seconds, it becomes a missile.

But there was another car — like its best friend and biggest rival: the Nissan Skyline R34. It came out before the Supra, back in 1957. The Skyline is popular because it was the main car in *Fast and Furious*. It goes from 0 to 100 in 4.6 seconds, with a top speed of 250 to 266 km/hr. It might look small, but with excellent modifications, it can hit 300, even close to 400 km/hr.

Nowadays, it is very hard to see one on the street. And if you do see one, it's probably a version where the engine doesn't even work anymore. If you want to see at least two or three of these cars, go to Japan. After all, both of these monsters were born there. There are still cars like that today, but they're more luxury-based — like Ferraris, Bugattis, and Paganis.

But not all of them made the same impact on the car world as the Supra did.



Now tell me: who do you think would win in a race — Supra or Nissan?

- A) Supra**
- B) Nissan**
- C) Your answer**

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No matter what your dream is, follow it to the end—because if you don't, you'll fall short.

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Now let me tell you more about my dream. Like I said before, I love electronic engineering. That job would allow me to create 40% of the components used in car manufacturing. Pretty much everything I do can help bring me closer to working with cars. And if I don't end up becoming an engineer, then I'm definitely going to be a mechanic.

But I would like to do that in Japan, because the cars I talked about just now? They're all from Japan. In my opinion, there is no other country that knows how to make sports cars like Japan does. If you want to see real cars, I recommend traveling to Japan — specifically to Daikoku PA.

But be careful too, although honestly, I don't think there's much danger there.

One last piece of advice: no matter what your dream is, follow it to the end — because if you don't, you'll fall short.

When you see a sports car on the street, don't just say “wow” — watch it until it disappears from view and remember that moment. Because as more days pass, it gets harder and harder to see them out there. And when you do see them again, they will be in bad shape. That same 78% of humanity that says it wants the future doesn't realize that a piece of history — one that should've been preserved — is being abandoned.

But oh well... It looks like those good old days may never come back.

SERENITY

Hi, my name is Serenity, and I am 15 years old. I have been going to the Boys & Girls Clubs of Levy Hughes Clubhouse for a little over 8 years. My patch is about track. I have been running track since 6th grade. Now I am a rising 10th grader and still passionate about track. I first started running track in the first opportunity when I was able to play sports at my school as a 6th grader. I ran the 100m, 200m, 4x1, and long jump. But I was not really good at it till the 8th grade when I was the fastest in my grade. My dedication paid off as I received my first offer at the end of my 8th grade year from the head coach of an AAU team

named Power House Athletics (PHA) at the end of my middle school clusters meet. During then, I ran the 100m dash and 200m dash, and the PHA coach saw my potential. In the one year I ran for PHA, I have earned 20 medals in various events.

Once I got to 9th grade I started cross country but was having difficulties because I was not able to have my physical and did not have any transportation available for practices because my mom had got into a car accident, and her car was totaled. When my school was giving out free physicals, I was able to get one right before track started. I am happy that I did because



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All I have to say is that I love track. One of my mottos is you can do anything you put your mind to.”

the highlight of running track is when I made it to states with one of my other freshman friends. I was surprised and so happy to make it to states as a freshman because I had always wanted to go and not a lot of freshmans my age make it to states. Outside of the sport, something I can say is that my teammates are so helpful and nice, and I had so much fun with them. There were many memorable moments such as when we would go to Jacksonville for 3 days and play manhunt until 12:00 at night to where my coach shuffled us back to the hotel. Through track, I learned how to run and get in better shape. Running makes me feel at ease and peaceful, and it helps me with my communication skills. Running will get me far enough to get a college scholarship which will be a great help. It will give me a full ride to any college I want. All I have to say is that I love track. One of my mottos is you can do anything you put your mind to.



JAKORY



“ I have to always look out for my younger ones. So I try to set an example because I want my siblings to be the best they can be and also be the best human. ”

My name is Jakory, and I am 13 years old. My patch is about Dragon Ball Z. Dragon Ball is an anime show from 1989 with 9 seasons. The show follows the main character Goku as he defends Earth against enemies. The show includes battles against aliens and many achievements of new forms as the characters gain new powers.

I discovered this show when I was in third grade when I saw my dad watching it. I thought it was cool seeing characters achieving new forms in the DragonBall universe, adopting special moves, attacks and increasing in strength, stamina, and speed. This show inspired me greatly. Because of this show, I want to be an animator but also a boxer as well.

I want to be an animator because I want to make my own anime creating my own people and characters. The idea of being a boxer came from the cool boxing sequences in the episodes. In the show, there is a character named Vegeta (I know, it sounds like a vegetable), he is always proud and filled with a positive mindset that he will be the best and he can be the strongest. He inspires me and motivates me every time I listen to him. Mostly, I listen to him when I workout, following his practice and mindset,

now I can do an one arm push-up.

Every Dragon Ball fighter inspires me to become stronger throughout life. Along with Vegeta, another character named Goku taught me to never give up. Even though I am strong now, he taught me that I could always get stronger. I learned that working out can also make you live longer. The reason I like working out is because I am trying to be strong like the characters in Dragon Ball Z.

I am also the oldest sibling in all my family. As the oldest sibling of four and out of all my cousins, I have to always look out for my younger ones. So I try to set an example because I want my siblings to be the best they can be and also be the best human. So to do the best and be the best, I workout.

With the one-arm push up out of the way, I am going to practice doing a handstand, then after that, a hand stand push up.

DRAGON

BALL



HAYLEE

My name is Haylee. I am 16, and this is my story.

The wind bit at my face as I dragged my pink duffle bag across the gravel driveway, its wheels thudding over the uneven ground like a heartbeat out of rhythm. My fingers gripped the handle tight enough to turn my knuckles white, but I didn't stop. I couldn't. Behind me was everything I had lost. In front of me was everything I didn't want — but had no choice but to face.

Soistman Cottage stood in front of me like a bad dream with a fresh coat of paint. They called it a home, but it looked like a halfway point between survival and giving up. One of those places where kids like me were shuffled in and out like check-in baggage — stamped, sorted, and silenced.

No one greeted me at the door. Inside, the cottage smelled like cleaning products and something artificial — like the place had tried too hard to seem warm and failed. The walls were lined with generic artwork and motivational posters that made my skin crawl. I was shown to my room by a staff member whose name I forgot as soon as she said it. She pointed at the bed, told me I could unpack, and left like I was just another box to check off on her clipboard.

I stood in the middle of the room for a long time, just staring. I had brought everything I owned in that pink duffle. As I slowly unzipped it and started laying things out on the bed — some clothes, a toothbrush, a journal — I felt something sharp slice through the numbness.

This was real. I was really here. No going back. No home to return to. Just this place. Just me.

Time passed in pieces, days that blurred together, nights I barely slept. At first, I was quiet. Watching. Learning how the place worked, who to avoid, who would steal your snacks, who cried in their sleep. But slowly, I found them — my people. A few ride-or-die friends. Kids who were messed up in all the same ways I was, but still laughed too loud and cared too hard. We fought sometimes, sure — but outside that house, we were solid. A

team. A weird, broken little family.

And in the middle of all of that chaos, I fell for someone. He was patient in ways I didn't understand. My boyfriend. The one who tried — really tried — to pull me back every time I started slipping. He saw the

“ I love hard. I protect like it's instinct. And no matter what they take from me, they won't take that. Someday, I'll stand in a courtroom—not as a victim, not even as a survivor—but as a fighter. For every girl who didn't get to fight. For every voice they silenced. ”

This was my new “placement.” They said I would be here for a few months. No promises, no guarantees. Just time, and a bed with a thin blanket. I walked up the steps slowly, my heart lodged somewhere deep in my throat, my head pounding with the weight of everything that wasn't being said.

parts of me I could not. He held onto the best version of me even when I could not reach her myself. He reminded me I was more than the damage, more than the mistakes, more than the pain I kept shoving deep down. But that didn't mean I stayed clean. That didn't mean I always listened.

The truth is, I gave in to the spiral more than I fought it. The sadness, the numbness, the aching need to forget — it pulled at me until I caved. Every day became its own kind of dare: skipping school, lighting up behind the building, getting buzzed just enough to feel nothing.

We would steal candy bars and cheap makeup, take off without warning just to feel free for a minute. It was reckless. It was stupid. It was fun. And it was all about forgetting.

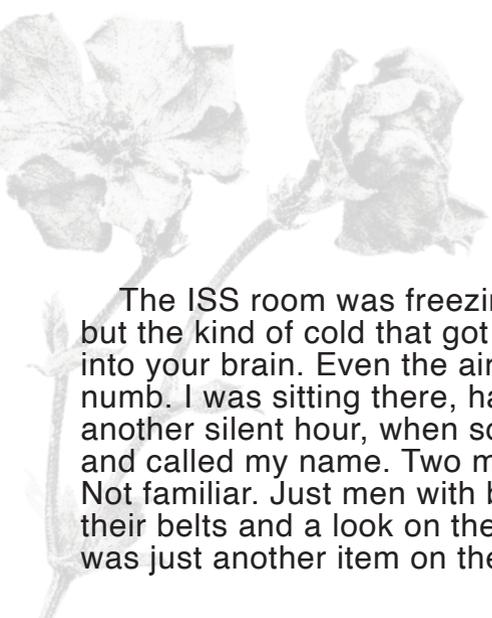
Forgetting the weight of everything I hadn't said out loud. Forgetting the hands that had touched me where no one ever should have. Forgetting that part of me was still screaming on the inside, and no one could hear.

That was the twisted thing about Soistman. It wasn't just a place for healing — it was a holding pattern. A space between surviving and deciding who you are going to be next.

Then, one day, they handed me my 45-day notice. I was being moved. Just like that. No warning, no time to process. I was leaving behind the people I had come to call my family — the chaos I had somehow made a home in. It felt like someone had grabbed my roots and yanked. Hard.

I cried that night. Not because I loved the rules or the structure or the system, but because for once, I had built something, and they were taking it from me.





The ISS room was freezing. Not just cold, but the kind of cold that got into your bones, into your brain. Even the air wanted you numb. I was sitting there, halfway through another silent hour, when someone came in and called my name. Two men. Not teachers. Not familiar. Just men with badges clipped to their belts and a look on their faces like this was just another item on their list.

my fingers started to shake, and all the air seemed to leave the room at once.

“Do you recognize them?” one of the men asked. I didn’t answer at first. I didn’t want to speak their names, didn’t want to give their faces more space in my mind than they already took. But I nodded. I pointed. One. Then the other.

They scribbled something down.

No reaction. No comfort. No space for me to be a person in that moment. Just two men doing their job, then telling me I could go.

I walked back to ISS like nothing had happened. Sat in the same seat. Put my head down.

Tried to stop shaking. But I wasn’t the same. Something had cracked open inside me.

That was supposed to be the start of something. A step toward justice... I waited for court dates that never came. For someone to ask me how I felt, what I needed. But they never did. I never saw a judge, never took the stand, never spoke a word in the place where justice is supposed to live. My truth

was folded up, filed away, and left to rot in some forgotten drawer. It was supposed to be closure. But it felt like being gagged.

Back in my room that night, I couldn’t sleep. I stared at the ceiling while the other girls whispered and giggled in the hallway. I couldn’t laugh with them. Not that night.

But somewhere in that grief came clarity.

If I wanted anything to change, I had to be the one to start changing it. No one was going to save me. No one was going to fix this for me. I had to climb out of it, one step at a time. Not for anyone else — for me.

I’m not a bad person. I’m a kid. A kid with PTSD. A kid who knows what addiction tastes like, what abandonment feels like. A kid who’s been through too much, too fast. But I’m also a kid with a fire in her chest. A dream tucked deep behind the trauma.

“ This world is not an easy place and that although it is scary, you will find your community, and it will get easier. ”

They told me to come with them. No explanation. No time to prepare.

We walked down a hallway I had walked a hundred times before, but this time it felt different — longer, quieter, like every step was echoing too loud. They led me into a small office tucked in the back of the school, no windows, just walls that looked like they’d soaked up too many secrets. The air smelled like dust and old printer ink. One of them sat behind the desk. The other stood, arms crossed. Neither of them looked at me like a kid. Just like someone they needed something from.

They slid a folder across the table.

Inside were photos. Two men.

Printed out and clipped to sheets of paper like it was routine. Their faces stared back at me — flat, empty, permanent. But I recognized them. My body knew before my brain caught up. My chest got tight,

I want to help every girl who never got justice. I want to see the ones who were silenced scream into the light. I want to be part of a world where survivors do not have to apologize for surviving.

The system bruised my heart and beat up my soul. It wrecked my credit before I even knew what a credit score was. I haven't seen my brother in almost a year. My calendar is filled with court dates and therapy appointments instead of birthday parties or dances.

But I'm still standing. Something had shifted. Something deep.

I lay there thinking about all the other girls like me. The ones who pointed. The ones who never got to speak. The ones whose stories stayed stuck inside their chests like broken glass. I thought: What if someone had stood up for me? What if someone had made noise, refused to let my voice be stolen?

That is when I knew. I was going to be that someone. I didn't care how broken the system was. I didn't care how many placements I had left, how many court-mandated meetings they shoved into my schedule. I didn't care that I still had nightmares, that I sometimes woke up screaming and couldn't explain why. I was still me. And me? I care. Beyond words.

I love hard. I protect like it's instinct. And no matter what they take from me, they won't take that. Someday, I'll stand in a courtroom — not as a victim, not even as a survivor — but as a fighter. For every girl who didn't get to fight. For every voice they silenced.

That is what I was born for.

My patch is meant to signify that isolation feeling of being in foster care, but adding that crown is showing that you shine through the cracks of the hurt. My story has led me to want to fight for those who hurt like I did. I want to be an attorney in the Special Victims Unit to help every girl that was ever silenced.

One thing I want my readers to understand about my story is: I don't write for a pity party. I want everyone to know they are not alone. I hope that people can empathize and understand but, also understand that this world is not an easy place and that although it is scary, you will find your community, and it will get easier.





To the writers of this book:

*Thank you for your time, your commitment,
your stories, and your vivacious energy.
Keep saying yes to all the opportunities that
arise and your future will be bright.
As Bob Marley said: "Love the life you live,
live the life you love."*

*Never forget the past, live in the present, and
build your legacy.*

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Frazier".



