

*The
Ephemeris Prize
2024*



Mississippi University for Women

The
*Ephemer**a Prize*
2024



The Ephemera Prize is awarded annually in conjunction with the Eudora Welty Writers' Symposium at Mississippi University for Women. The W is extremely grateful to the Robert M. Hearin Foundation for the support they have provided for the prize and the symposium over many years.

In 2024 the contest received 54 entries from 2 schools in Mississippi. The winners were each awarded a \$200 prize and invited to read their winning submissions before the symposium audience. Five honorable mentions were recognized, and the prize-winners read their entries, following readings by the two judges on October 25.

High school or home school students in grades 10-12 in Mississippi and nearby states were invited to write poems, stories, or essays on the Symposium and Ephemera Prize theme “Keep out from under these feet... I got a long way”: Resilience and Resistance in the South” or Eudora Welty’s story “A Worn Path” which inspired the theme. Students from other states may participate if an alumna or alumnus of The W sponsors them by writing a letter.

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2024 Judges

James E. Cherry, author of *Between Chance and Mercy*

Gerry Wilson, author of *That Pinson Girl*

The current Ephemera Prize theme and contest rules can be found on our website:

www.muw.edu/welty/ephemeraprize

Cover: Blue Heron

The Ephemera Prize 2024

*“Keep out from under these feet... I got a long way”
Resilience and Resistance in the South*

| | | |
|---|-------|----|
| Kaylee Alford, “Dirt” The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Canton | Essay | 4 |
| Tiara Jones, “The Truth in the Lima” The Mississippi School of the Arts, Lamar | Story | 6 |
| Crislyn Lance, “The Creation,” The Mississippi School of the Arts, Brookhaven | Poem | 9 |
| Savannah Massey, “mississippi soil is a call to a better place” and “Eden, Mississippi” The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Pelahatchie | Poems | 10 |
| Claire Rizzo, “To Rural Ambition” The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Cleveland | Essay | 12 |

Honorable Mentions

| | | |
|---|-------|----|
| Cooper Brumfield, “Sincerely Yours” The Mississippi School of the Arts, Natchez | Story | 14 |
| Jaidyn Bryant, “Delta, Delta, Delta” The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Cleveland | Essay | 15 |
| Ramse Jefferson, “Growing Pains” The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science Raymond | Poem | 17 |
| Carys Peden, “Self-Identity” The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science Sturgis | Essay | 18 |
| Brianna Trotter, “Little Blue” The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, Madison | Essay | 20 |
| Participating Schools & Teachers | | 22 |

Dirt

The horizon stretches out like an unbroken thread. Here, the land is flat and wide, revealing every secret under the sun. The Mississippi Delta's muddy bayous weave through the veins of the earth, the water whispering secrets to the cypress trees. It's a place where time seems so slow, where you can see everything for miles—each field, each tree, each rusting fence post. The Delta doesn't just show you the land; it lays bare the soul of a place that has seen everything and forgotten nothing.

I waded in the water, my muck boots sinking into the mud under my feet. The early mornings were filled with the scent of the earth and fish; the sounds of my grandfather's steady voice mixed with the gentle lapping of the water. The heat of the day was palpable, the July sun licking at the back of my neck. I reached my hand down in the cool, murky depths to check the net, the catfish, slippery and defiant, clamped onto me with surprising strength. My grandfather chuckled lightly and said, "That's the price of doing business with these critters." As much as I dreaded catfish farming, these moments taught me patience, resilience, and a connection to the land that was as deep as the bayous themselves.

The Delta's soil was everywhere —under my fingernails, on my clothes, in the air. It became a part of me, but I didn't always appreciate it. My spikes dug into the hot, dry soil at the mound, my ponytail latching onto the back of my neck, my sweat holding it in place. I was the first seventh grader on the Indianola Academy varsity softball team, pushing myself to my limits. I tore my hamstring at the beginning of my sophomore year, the dirt being unforgivably and mockingly firm when I slid, effectively putting me out for the whole season. It forced me to slow down and reflect; that dirt had become a part of my journey, every step, every slide, every fall.

At the end of my tenth-grade year, I was accepted into the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science (MSMS), a residential school for the best and brightest in Mississippi. The Delta dirt under my feet soon turned into Columbus soil, an unfamiliar but welcoming change. The hands that once pulled catfish from muddy waters now handled microscopes and petri dishes in biology class. The dirt under my fingernails was replaced by gram crystal violet from staining cells. The red clay that painted my clothes turned into acrylic stains from art class. And the mud smeared onto my hands turned into pen ink from late night writing assignments. The Delta seemed to be a dim star compared to the great, blazing sun I was experiencing at MSMS. The lessons here were different—more academic, structured—but no less valuable.

Yet, despite the challenge and excitement of MSMS, the Delta never strayed far from my mind. I have learned in its fields, its waters, its unforgiving soil, and those lessons stayed with me. Patience, perseverance, and humility—traits that grew deep within me—became the foundation of my success at MSMS. The contrast of these two worlds showed me that no one place holds the answers; they complement each other.

When I returned to the Delta in my junior year, it was for a different type of lesson. The same earth we had once worked together on the farm now opened up to receive my grandfather's flower-painted casket. The scent of rain and roses filled the air, but the preacher's words blurred into the background. All I could focus on was the mud clinging to the hem of my skirt, heavy and damp, as if the Delta itself was holding on to me. My warm tears mingled with the cold ground, and the soil felt softer, more forgiving under my feet.

The dirt I once resented had become a constant companion. It had witnessed my struggles. It had witnessed my triumphs. Then, as I stood at my grandfather's grave, the same soil seemed to cradle the memories of all I have become. The Delta had been a backdrop to my growth, a reminder of where I came from. The soil that was once a symbol of my resistance had become a grounding force. The roots of my past would always anchor me, no matter how far I traveled.

The Truth in the Lima

Monday mornins' is the hour of the day when all the school chilen' be smelling themselves. That's what Asha's mother used to always say to her anyway.

The fast tail girls with their new greased braids that pullin on their scalps be smacking their gums down the hallway. The young boys with their new shoes be jumpin' to the air as they pounce to the bathroom as if they have no home trainin' and wouldn't think twice before peeing on themselves.

That's what Asha expected to see. As she stood outside her sixth grade classroom door, with her thick black cat eye glasses pushed to the bone of her nose, her wool hair in a tight puff ball, and her bony fingers tapping together anxiously, she waited to see her students barrel towards her with arrogant smiles on their lips and their faces ready to get slapped by their mothers.

She didn't see that though, she just saw regular kids with tired smiles and eyes that matched hers when she was a nervous child. Yes some of them did grimace, but it didn't seem that it came from disrespect, it was a reflex everytime their bookbags caught on their freshly combed hair.

At the sight, Asha prepared to open her arms in a wide greeting, but she stopped mid arch when she heard a cough from the hall across from her.

"Uh uh honey, you can't start letting them think you's friends this early on."

The "advice" sounded like her mother, but Asha met the half smirk and half scowl of a ebony brown senior lady that had one wrinkled hand on her hip and the other hand touching up her cotton hair that was cat-licked into a statue Sunday hair-do.

"Ma'am?" asked Asha as she plastered on her best pastor's wife's smile.

The lady spoke as she watched her students come in her classroom with longing faces, "It's Mrs. Omar," the woman started coughing which made Asha's face cringe but she still kept her smile up.

After the woman stopped coughing she said; "And I was sayin', you better not make them students think y'all all best friends. That's how they get you in trouble. Especially the ones that come in the building smelling like fresh vaseline," Mrs. Omar said while wiping the edge of her lips with a paper towel she had clenched in her fist.

Asha pursed her lips as she spoke; "I'm just greeting them. I mean... they already look so sad, a simple greeting could put smiles on their faces."

Mrs. Omar clucked her tongue and shook her head as she watched the students keep strolling in.

Mrs. Omar snorts, "That's what that one girl thought when she taught here back in 2014.

She spent all her money to get her class some new lunchboxes, then all the children with the ashy elbows went and got her kicked out anyway.”

Asha asked shocked, “Kicked out? How did they do that?”

As Asha waited for Mrs. Omar’s answer, she watched as two girls walked up to Mrs. Omar’s doorway. One girl was a young black girl that had bright blue beads in her hair and big round white glasses pushed up to the bridge of her nose, the other girl was a young white girl whose hair was in dutch braids. She grinned a blush pink cheeky smile. Both girls looked anxious as Mrs. Omar examined them.

Asha didn’t know why though, but she soon figured it out when Mrs. Omar moved out the doorway and smiled at the girls and said, “You sure pretty.”

Asha smiled at the same time as the girls both smiled, but Mrs. Omar continued, “Your momma sure did good with your dutch braids. Gone on and get in the classroom with that pretty face.”

Asha and the little black girl both frowned at the same time. Meanwhile, the white little girl beamed.

Asha watched as both girls trotted into the classroom before she spoke up, “That was nice of you, but why didn’t you compliment the other student?”

Mrs. Omar scoffed the same time the class bell rang before she answered, “If I would’ve told that chile she was pretty she wouldn’t have let any boy or man hear the end of it. But the other girl, she’s going to be humble about it and will stay that way.”

Asha’s mouth gaped open, “That isn’t necessarily t-”

Mrs. Omar held up her hand, “You’ll understand what I mean when you get a fast chile one day.”

Asha let her arms drop to her sides as she was met with the front of Mrs. Omar homeroom door.

*

It wasn’t too hard for Asha to remember the day she decided that she hated her hair, and she was better off being of any race other than black. On the other hand, it was hard for her to think back on the person who caused this turmoil in her memory. The person who she wanted to attach herself to for warmth, the one person who she craved love and discipline from, the only person Asha desired to truly see her. Asha never got those factors of her character, little to her hope. Her mother only could see how “fat” Asha was when she ate two bowls of lima beans. She could only see the blackness Asha possessed that even her own black mother didn’t call beauty.

*

“Who here loves to talk about themselves?”

Asha’s feet slowly paced the yellowish-brownish floor of her classroom. She looked down at her feet, she mentally cringed as she saw that her open toes had some crusty uneven nails as she waited for her class to answer.

Asha could hear some small shuffles of nervousness, she smiled at what she expected.

With that small grin, Asha looked up, “That’s okay. I didn’t really think there was something fun or interesting to say about myself either. But my old teacher would tell me, “Miss.

Ephemera

Williams, just say what color your eyes are and keep on movin'."

The students laughed as Asha mockeds a cranky voice that sounded like crunchy, cold honey.

Asha lightly giggled with them then looked around their faces until one of her eyes landed on a black boy that had rested his head on the heel of his right palm. His eyes portrayed tiredness and dwindling patience.

"What about you?"

All the students turn to follow Asha's gaze. The boy blinked slowly, and made an exaggerated yawn as he looked at her.

"Ma'am" He grumbled.

Asha smirked, "What's your name?"

The boy mumbled in response.

"I'm sorry, I can't hear you, maybe this is better."

Asha walked up to the boy that sat in the back of the class. She gave a quick rack of her knuckles on his desk, before she repeated herself, "What's your name?"

The boy sighed as he grumbled, "It's Kairi."

Asha looked around to see her class reaction, their faces just stood still. But Asha knew that to Kairi, the students were giggling and pointing fingers at them.

Asha nodded, "I love your name Kairi, why were you so hesitant to tell me?"

Kairi shrugged, "Because my name sounds like a girl's name. I hate it."

Asha puts her hands on her petite hips, "Why do you think you have a girl's name?"

Kairi sighed. "My father got mad when he found out that my mama named me that. He didn't like it, he wanted to name me Kel. A name appropriate for a black man."

*

Asha knew she wanted to become a literature teacher when she discovered the true impact words have on the heart.

When she was in seventh grade she wrote a poem about her favorite dish. Her grandma's turkey necks that soaked the sweet cornbread that would be steaming on her plate which was all tied by those seasoned lima beans.

In that poem she just started off explaining how the food tasted, but as each new word ingrained itself on that paper, she embraced feelings that she didn't know she was allowed to have. Those Turkey Necks became a metaphor for what she thinks the rope she feels is around her neck will do when she fights the mindset her mother boiled into her. Those Lima Beans became a symbol of an antidote that finally found its way to becoming a poison.

*

Asha knew that when she was younger, she would have burned with shame and embarrassment as people stared at her appearance. She was insecure, but it wasn't due to her peers. It was caused by her mother preparing her for a school day telling her that her hair is nappy and that wouldn't get her a boyfriend. Her hair needed to be silk. Just like her neighbor Suzie's.

Crislyn Lance

The Creation

The land breathes thick with history,
humid air clinging to skin,
ancient trees draped in moss,
their branches heavy with memory.
This soil remembers everything
the crack of the whip,
the cries of mothers,
the silent prayers under a blanket of stars.
yet beneath the weight of it all,
the people stand,
weathered and unbowed.
Hands calloused from labor,
feet that have marched endless roads
backs that have carried the burdens of generations.
still, they rise,
not in spite of the struggle
but through it,
carving paths through stone
with nothing but will.
Resistance here is quiet
a whisper passed down the kitchens,
a song hummed in fields,
the steady heartbeat of survival
under oppression's graze.
It is a refusal to be erased,
to let the story end with pain,
to be buried beneath the weight
of centuries.
The South holds its people like the river holds its course,
shifting, relentless, never breaking.
and like the river,
they have learned to flow,
around barriers,
through walls,
carving new paths
with each rising tide.
Resilience here is not just endurance,
it is creation,
the birth of freedom in a place
That tried to forget what freedom means.

*mississippi soil is a call
to better places*

i. you are filled, head to toe, with the kind of hunger that clings to the sharp of fish hooks. that kind of lying in wait under the glassy flat of your grandfather's lake for someone to dare take a bite outta you. you've got the kind of hunger that fights back.

ii. the first time you were home alone, you went through your momma's bathroom cabinet and found lipstick. it tasted just like the expiration date, but you didn't know it at the time. you paraded it around your empty house the way trees wear october.

iii. when you were seven, you climbed all the way up an oak tree, up to the thin branches. they didn't want you, sent you back down after they cracked and gave way. the grass knocked the wind outta you as you smacked the ground. everything is painted in breathless shades of vertigo.

iv. you kissed another boy for the first time on the edge of a creek. jeans rolled up to the calves. ankle deep in that cool water. heels slightly settled into the mud. toes rested on the flat rocks. it was dry and awkward. that boy ended up breaking your heart, moved half a world away to start a life you didn't fit into.

v. here you are, perched high and dry like fruit dotting the top branch of your momma's fig tree, getting plucked apart by the birds and soiled by the sun. you wanna get outta here. you can't stand the magnolia trees your grandmother planted in the yard when she was young or the white flowers or the waxy leaves because all they are is a hail to your home state.

Eden, Mississippi

On Sundays, we left screen doors that sang as they closed
and went down to the river dividing the bare trees
to baptize each other in the filthy water. We danced
like we were famous and covered our day clothes in mud
because that's what they were for. Once,
we went farther than we were supposed to and found
a starch white carcass stretched across the rocks. You faced
away from me, shirt rolled to your shoulders
so I could count each vertebra poking through your soft skin
to see if the ribcage in the water belonged to us. I will never forget how
you felt under my fingers, dragging each one over
the freckles and dirt on your back or your hair two shades darker,
drenched and making wet swirls down your spine
like blue lines on a map. Later, we walked to the railroad track
that split the land just behind your house and pretended
we belonged between the cross ties and kudzu. We made sad little bouquets
out of the weeds and little white flowers hiding between each rail
but gave them to each other like trophies. Momma said
that us girls are growing up to be good southern women. I think
you're a good southern woman: soft eyes, long brown hair,
and a kind mouth. She says we're good at what we were raised to be
and that one day, we'll have to make a home outside of these woods. But
I think we'll stay calf-deep in the creek, with pollen and flower petals
wedged under our fingernails, until it freezes over.

To Rural Ambition

You will mourn.

No, not for family or friends—the only person you will lose during the course to adulthood is your great grandmother, whom you'll only remember by the smell of roses and the feeling of her lap atop a corduroy armchair. Rather than mourning for what was, you will grieve for what has never been. Adults call this *anemoia*. Your world will widen far beyond the serrated rows of home, and the sight of what has been missed will haunt you.

You will watch.

You'll observe those who were born into the life you'll crave, one of schools without yellowed cinderblock walls and parents with multi-syllabled titles, and you'll notice the differences between you. They'll have visited more countries than you can name, lived in more homes than the ones that number your neighborhood, and be able to read you like a children's book the moment you sit down. Once math gets an alphabet and science goes beyond planting pumpkin seeds, the girl next to you will have learned the advanced curriculum you wail over while you were still picking up the latter end of long division. Boys up north will laugh to your face about the how you waltz on vowels and foxtrot over consonants. Far more than your best effort will be considered others' bare minimum, and you'll be made to make up the difference.

You will compare.

Once the realization that the classroom aspect of your upbringing, despite the best efforts of all those behind the big desks, is inherently inferior to the children whose childhoods were illuminated by sunshine and shiny plaster instead of buzzing fluorescent tube lights, your world will turn on its head. You will come to realize that the others' educations went far beyond the Bill Nye, borax crystals and handmade burets that encompassed your definition of the learning world, and that there are no fail-safes in place to ensure the success of whatever odd medium you ended up being. You will lay in the valley of the Venn diagram, your very existence a testament to the blurred line between deficiency and the extraordinary, until you awaken to the fearful gospel of effort.

You will hunger.

You'll build a separate place on the podium from milk crates, pallets, and Mack wheels. You'll run your tiptoed feet down the highway, refusing to be another victim

of the fields that swallow and the dilapidation that spreads like a sickness. You'll bite deep into the arm of any opportunity that walks your way; you'll learn to try and claw your way to the top, no matter how many nails you lose to the climb. On the parade to first place, a time will come when you look down and won't be able to recognize if the blood, sweat, and tears covering you are still your own. The urge to excel will become second nature, your very consciousness possessed by an obsession to exceed the expectations placed upon you by chance and perception. You will crave for more yet find yourself even emptier than you began.

You will correct.

Years down the line, you will come to understand that you exist in spite, rather than because, of the circumstances that'll lead you far from home. You'll soon come to know that not everyone had the same fortune as you; there are thousands of people around you who never had the same islands of support in the sea of disparity that you do. You'll find your shoes, more and more, landing on top of marble and under columns instead of linoleum and yet you'll yearn for the familiar way necessity feels under your feet. It will come to your realization that every child deserves more than what you now consider in your present-past to be generosity. Your voice will raise itself to the world once more, this time for the sake of thousands, and you will find that the world responds.

You will return.

sincerely yours

you'll be 9 when you first notice him, that guy who every girl says they have a crush on, not because they actually do, but because "that's what girls are supposed to do." and you'll start to play football with him because that's what boys are supposed to do, you'll tell yourself that you don't like him, instead you just really want to be his friend, be near him, be like him. "boys can't like boys" you'll tell yourself, and you will keep playing football every day, even though you realized you hated it a long time ago.

you'll be 17 when you meet him, that guy that makes your stomach churn when he says your name, the guy that makes you feel nervous when he asks to hang out. it will be with him where you hear that word again, the one your dad used when you said you didn't want to get a haircut the summer after freshman year. that one you heard your friend say in the fifth grade after his mom let it slip one night, she'll tell him never to repeat it, yet all it will do is give him an incentive for him to use it more. you will have thought about saying it, but you never do, not because you didn't want to offend anyone, but you'll be scared that once it leaves the confines of your mind it will become more than just a thought. almost as if once it crawls out of your lips it will wrap its arms around you and sink its teeth into your back.

you'll be 18 when he kisses you for the first time, you'll feel a shock go down your body, it'll resonate at your feet but it won't leave you. and you'll fall in love then and there, and none of it will matter. you'll get out of his run down 2004 corolla that you've spent countless hours in. you'll walk up your front lawn in silence, and he'll follow you, not because he feels like he has to, but because you know he loves you too.

it will be that night when you leave him on your patio, feel your face berated by winds of the mississippi august

it will be that night when you slam the door in his face as you force down muffled sobs,

and it will be that night where you say that word for the very first time.

Jaidyn Bryant

Delta, Delta, Delta

Money, Mississippi, died when Emmett Till died. No stores, no markets—nothing stood in Money except a small chapel. Money was a speck of dust on the landscape of the Delta but a turning point in history. A town you would miss if you didn't know where to look. I was standing in the same spot a boy my age had been tortured for supposedly doing something so commonplace to me: touching a white person.

Bryant's Grocery, which had once been two stories tall, was now a dilapidated, sunken roof, ivy-infested rotten carcass of its former self. The only thing to guide you towards the significance of the place was the latest historical marker, which had been replaced three times because of various assassination attempts (once hydrochloric acid, twice by gunshots). The sign was different from the normal historical markers. Instead of the normal green background and silver lettering, it had a glossy black background with orange lettering that jumped out at you. Most importantly, it had pictures of Emmett and his mother. Salt streams outlined my face. My eyes shot darts at the entire place struggling to understand. "Why did I not know about this place? Why did I grow up here and never visit? Why are they letting it rot?" are questions I would ask my mother and other elders after I visited.

Growing up in the Delta in the 1980's, she did not learn of Till's murder until she was thirty-four in 2005 (just two years before she gave birth to me). She had the honor of taking care of an elderly man who happened to be a coroner during that time, and he passed on the knowledge. I shook my head in disdain that despite Till's murder being local history, both she and I, decades apart, had never been formally given a lesson on him in school.

The words of Dr. Brian Houck and Dr. Pablo Correa rang in my head, "Public memory is fleeting. If we don't remember, then who?" They were learned and experienced documentarians with a special interest in the Mississippi Delta. Hailing from Florida State University, they had put a program together to inspire kids in the Mississippi Delta to get into the documentary industry. Both were so skilled in rhetoric you could've sworn they were politicians. Dr. Houck spoke with a booming voice that was gentle but still commanding. Dr. Correa on the other side of the spectrum was a poet with a passion for history, often swaying when he talked. Most importantly, they trusted their students. On the second day after the first lecture, they put a four-thousand-dollar camera and told me to have at it.

I had notions of what I wanted to shoot before but not any practical experience. My classmates and I went downtown and got to know the town of Sumner visually. We shot birds, lakes, flowers, and anything that we found beautiful. I flew and almost crashed my very first drone that week. I set up lighting in interviews. The most special moment was when I got the opportunity to interview Linda Davis, a voting rights activist who knew Fannie Lou Hamer personally. She was a wealthy college student from a liberal family in Boston when she came to participate in Freedom Summer. She

Ephemera

was a part of the Emmett Till generation that could not turn a blind eye to the violence ongoing in her country. So, the first chance she got she was in Mississippi advocating. Her voice had gotten gentle with time, but she spoke with a fire. As she spoke, I thought to myself, “She didn’t have to take a gap year to come organize in Mississippi. She didn’t have to stay a year after the Equal Rights Voting Act to help Ruleville adjust. She could have lived a perfectly safe life in Boston away from everything.” Listening to her speak and being an active part of change within Mississippi only confirmed that initial spark within my gut. I had to take a risk.

Before the Mississippi Delta Film Academy, I did not feel like a filmmaker. I did not think I had any stories worth telling anyone besides friends and family. In math, delta means change. To me, Delta is home. When I first came to MSMS, I chased subjects that I was good at for validation. I dreamed of writing but never wrote. I thought independence was driving yourself to school or hanging out with your friends past ten ’o’ clock. I never had serious control over my own life. Every teacher I had was just like Dr. Houck, they trusted me more than I trusted myself. As Dr. Houck said, “Deltans are the strongest people on Earth. They adapt. They survive.” I know that now.

Ramse Jefferson

Growing Pains

We were ants.
Every leg
was a tower.
Every day
spanned months.

You glowed
back then,
my little star.

We were the world.
Our laughter was
thunder shaking bones.
We woke the Earth,
invited all to join.
Our laughter
formed mountains,
your smile
the candles in the sky.

Whatever crushed
that radiance?

Now we're giants,
pretending we weren't ever ants,
missing how we laughed
at nothing, everything.
How we smiled,
remember how?
Our past a rose,
reminding how great
we aren't anymore.

Self-Identity

I struggled to control my heaving sobs on my bedroom floor, my fingers shaking as they tallied up the last of my savings. I tried to slow my breathing as I held what was supposed to be my money; I did not want my parents to hear their daughter cry over the money they were taking from her to pay this month's rent. I hastily wiped my tears as my father entered my room.

"I'm sorry sweetie," Dad said. "You know I'll pay you back once I get the chance."

"It's fine," I replied quietly, looking at my hands holding one another in my lap.

My father slowly walked through the doorway, his head sagging in shame.

My family always struggled financially, and I learned early that our household lived paycheck-to-paycheck. This reality smacked hard once I had to support my family for a summer. My dad had recently quit his trucking job because he was consistently forced to violate DOT guidelines: violating these guidelines could result in having one's CDL, trucking license, revoked. The process of his finding another job lasted months. During his unemployment, I would buy groceries and pay the bills for our family. Although my parents tried to sell what they could around the house, the burden of finances ultimately fell upon me.

I began work that summer at a small, blue, snow cone shack, The Sugar Shack, in Louisville, Mississippi. The Sugar Shack hired those younger than sixteen, meaning this shack was the only place I could work. I carefully compiled the shaven ice and colorful syrups for my \$7.25 hourly wage. I took my job seriously, wanting satisfaction although I could not hold the fruits of my work; my father did not provide food for me, but he provided his work ethic. Each time I flung the dirty water off the floor at closing, however, I felt desolation despite my pride. No one else at Winston Academy had to work at my age, and when they began working, their only thoughts about their paychecks consisted of new clothes, hair appointments, and nail sessions. While I worked, my classmates participated in competitive cheer, piano lessons, or ACT classes. Most of my peers knew their interests, and I only knew that I had to succeed one day so my financial stresses would not haunt me into adulthood. I lived on autopilot, sweeping, mopping, and cashing out customers. I had no time to have interests.

Near the end of sophomore year of high school, I applied to The Mississippi School for Math and Science, a public residential high school for academically gifted youth. When I arrived on campus that fall, kids who seemed to know everything about themselves greeted me. My peers knew prospective colleges and their favorite books, and they displayed talents such as violin that they practiced since early childhood. I endured embarrassment as my classmates asked what my favorite hobbies, classes, or shows were. I could boast nothing about myself except the fact that I worked three jobs before arriving on campus. As the passions of the other kids presented themselves to me, I realized that my upbringing had left me with a non-existent self-identity because of the constant financial stress I had endured.

I needed to learn about myself before humiliation continued. I joined various clubs that my school had to offer, and I studied hard, trying to cling to and encounter my identity. I finally discovered that I had an affinity for economics. I found economic issues like wealth distribution interesting because of my own situation. I uncovered a love for Speech and Debate and student Senate; these organizations granted me the opportunity to be an advocate, defending hypothetical situations or my peers on campus. These affinities give me reason to believe my future might lie somewhere in economics, finance, or law. I might not exactly know my future, but I have confidence in myself because of overcome challenges, and I know the girl who hiddenly sobbed over the last of her savings will be thrilled to see what her future self accomplishes.

Little Blue

“I’ve never been in a house with stairs before,” I told my friend in awe as I plopped my overnight bag down on her queen-sized bed. Her house was big and red and smelled like pine. The floors were mopped to a shine and the living room was much cleaner than my toy-riddled one. The big red house felt like a maze: big rooms dedicated to different purposes. In the big red house, guests could sleep in a bed and not an air mattress, laundry machines were not in the kitchen, and work wasn’t done at the dining room table. “It’s almost like a hotel!” I exclaimed as my friend gave me the grand tour of the place she called home.

The next morning, I went back to my little blue trailer. My mother greeted me, bottle-feeding my brother who was fresh out of the NICU. My father was lounging on the couch watching football on his big, metal television, and honeysuckle-scented wax melts filled my nostrils. Unfolded clothes piled up on the beige piece of furniture that was our designated “laundry chair”; my mother and I would fold them as soon as my brother fell asleep.

“Her house was huge, Mama!” Folding bleach-stained towels, I excitedly told my mother. “It even had stairs!”

My mother laughed at my childish comment, “Are you disappointed that we don’t have stairs?”

At that moment, I looked around at my surroundings. The laminated floors that my father had installed were beginning to lift, revealing the rotting wood beneath them. The front door glass was cracked as a result of a recent fight my parents had. There were no fancy staircases to be found, and twelve-year-old me *was* disappointed. I wondered why we didn’t live as lavishly as my friends did. Not wanting to upset my mother with my true answer, I replied “No, silly!” and continued to fold towels quietly.

Years later, we finally moved out of my childhood home. Following our move, things seemed to fall apart at the seams: my grandfather would pass away, my father would leave our family for another, I would move to Mississippi’s most rigorous high school, and my mother would realize that opportunities were waiting for her outside of Mississippi. The transition from being a part of a close, loving family to a family that would never be in the same room again was difficult. The changes came with constant worries. Between scrambling to make my family happy and adjusting to the rigorous academia of boarding school it almost felt like my brain was a chair piled up with laundry, just like the one in my childhood home. While I wept for my parents’ health and happiness, my left hand got stained with pencil lead from writing wrong answers to calculus equations.

The worries seemed to be never-ending, and sometimes I wondered what life would have been like if we stayed in the little blue trailer. I imagined that things would be perfect and my family would grow old together, but I know that if we had

stayed, all the great things that happened to me would vanish. My father would have suffered an unhappy marriage if he hadn't left. I would have never known about The Mississippi School for Math and Science if I hadn't transferred schools. My mother would not have taken the leap of moving to New Mexico if my father didn't leave. My baby brother would have grown up in an unsafe neighborhood with parents who broke front doors when they fought.

In reality, that little blue trailer was the only "home" I ever knew. It wasn't big or red and it didn't smell like pine, but it was the home that sheltered my family. Over the years, I have learned that I don't need the biggest and most trendy things to be happy. Every day, I think about the memories I made in that home: the home where I baked my first batch of brownies, the home where I held my baby brother for the first time, and the home where I learned that families can still make loving memories when times are rough. Even if we live in separate worlds now, I will forever consider that moment in time "home" to me.

Participating Schools & Teachers

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The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Sciences

The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Sciences

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