



2026

Larry Kruse Memorial Writing Contest

Northeast Iowa Community College

The 6th annual district-wide **Larry Kruse Memorial Writing Contest** celebrates and encourages original writing by students at Northeast Iowa Community College.

The NICC Writing Contest is held in memory of **Lawrence Francis "Larry" Kruse (1945-2020)**, a former writing instructor in the Peosta and Dubuque Learning Centers. His gentle approach and unexpected sense of humor made him a favorite resource for many student writers.

Larry retired from his Learning Center work in 2015. Due to a car accident in 2020, he has now passed on to the next stage of writing and revision. We hope the ideas that he planted will encourage student writers for years to come!

Larry Kruse launched the first NICC writing contest in 2002. That first writing contest, held every spring semester, was open to Peosta and Dubuque students. In 2015, the Calmar Learning Center also organized a writing contest.

In 2021, the Peosta and Calmar contests were combined into the first district-wide NICC Writing Contest.

In Spring 2026, we celebrate the 6th annual district-wide NICC Writing Contest. This year's contest was judged by a panel of NICC employees from the Learning and Testing Centers and Libraries on both campuses.

Students were encouraged to enter their original writing from the 2025-2026 academic year in one of three categories: *short essays* (up to 1200 words), *long or research-based essays* (1201-4000 words), and *fiction* (up to 4000 words).

First place winners will receive a \$300 NICC scholarship. Second place winners will receive a \$200 scholarship. Honorable mention winners earn recognition.

We hope you enjoy reading the winning entries!



A special thank you to every NICC student who entered the writing contest. The judges had some tough decisions to make. We appreciate your hard work and effort to create authentic writing that engages and inspires the reader!

Thanks to all NICC faculty who encouraged students to enter the Writing Contest. Your teaching is making a difference to student writing!



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Reader Alert: Some entries deal with sensitive or mature themes. Reader discretion is advised.



★ 1st Place ★



Walking Into My Future: A Life in Funeral Service

Written by Taitem Marburger

SHORT ESSAY

The stained glass carries a long reflection on the polished floorboards, scattering morning light, giving my walls a sense of a sanctuary. There is a row of chairs placed by the doors that I often sit in, reflecting on my life. Sometimes I sit there as if I was a guest, imagining the emotions. Many people think morticians are peculiar, but to me, a funeral home is one of the most human places you can walk into. Every chair, every flower, every whispered memory holds meaning.

When I was younger, my dad had a big influence on the way I saw the world. He was the one who sparked my interest in things most people call morbid. Whether it was watching scary movies together or hearing him talk about death without fear, he made it feel less like something to fear and more like something to understand. At first it was just curiosity, but over time, that interest grew into something more meaningful.

While many people turn away from death, I've found myself looking closer. It has changed how I look at the world, to appreciate things I wouldn't have otherwise. Life is so short. For many people, a career feels like a cycle of waiting for the weekend. But for me, this path feels like freedom, because it gives me purpose every day. It will be a gift to be able to sit here, in this chair, in my own funeral home, carrying my name on the sign and some of the burdens that families shouldn't have to face alone.

The air is still filled by the floral scents of yesterday's service. The flowers were more than a decoration; they were symbols of a life fully lived. The life of someone who once stood at an altar saying "I do," who once held their first child and watched their tiny steps turn into moments. Behind every arrangement is a lifetime of moments,

some ordinary and some unforgettable. I am reminded that funeral service is not about death itself, but about honoring the lives that came before it.

Being surrounded by so many reminders of how short life can be has made me cherish those around me. Knowing every day could be the last, I get to look forward to seeing the sweet boy who has supported me on this journey. Sometimes after a service I look at his gentle features, and it fills my chest with warmth, knowing this work will be my greatest climb and worst downfall. In a sharp sadness, I am painfully aware of how fragile time is. It makes me greedy in the best and hardest way. The constant stress of trying to cram every second full of ordinary sweetness because I don't want to waste a single one. Still, that urgency has a kindness to it. It teaches me to notice him more, and to say "I love you" without waiting.

Loving him this way has shaped me into the person I would want to be in times of need and hardship. It's the person I hope to be for every family that walks through my doors someday, finding comfort in the care I give. If I can offer even a small moment of peace in their storm, every

The air is still filled by the floral scents of yesterday's service.

hard day, the ache in my chest will have been worth it.

The road to this place was not easy. I remember long nights at NICC, where

exhaustion pressed on me, but so did a stubborn hope. Each late study session and every lecture became another step toward the life I was determined to build. I carried not just my own dreams, but the weight of every person who believed in me. But those years taught me to find beauty in hard things. They taught me to steady my hands when the world shook, and to let passion speak louder than fear.

Those years at NICC became the foundation of everything I have now. The classrooms may have been small, but the lessons were enormous. I remember anatomy and physiology, flipping through pages of diagrams late into the night until the muscles and bones became more than just terms on a chart; they became a map of

the very work I would be doing for the rest of my life. Composition courses shaped my voice, teaching me how to put thoughts into words so I could speak with families in moments when words were hardest to find. Even public speaking, which I once dreaded, became a gift. It taught me how to steady my voice, to stand firm, and to communicate with confidence. Every assignment, every test, every late walk across campus was another brick laid in the life I was determined to build.

Transferring to DMACC felt like a stepping stone into the bigger world of mortuary science. The courses were harder, the pace faster, but it was the challenge I had prepared myself for. Funeral law, restorative art, embalming, each subject demanded focus, but together they stitched me into a professional. Education did more than give me skills; it also gave me resilience. Those classrooms were where I became more than just a student; I became the director I had always imagined. The one sitting here today in my own funeral home, steady and ready to serve.

Just last week, a family came to me whose grief I will carry with me forever. They had lost their father, a man whose presence filled every corner of their lives. I remember the daughter's trembling voice as she spoke about how she didn't know how to plan something so final, and the mother who sat quietly, clutching her hands as if she was holding the whole world from breaking apart. I guided them through each step. Choosing flowers, deciding on music, writing the obituary. In the silence between

decisions, I sat with them, simply present. It wasn't my words that mattered most; it was the steadiness I could offer.

I often think back on the funeral director who once guided my own family. I can still recall the quiet kindness shown to us in our hardest days, and how deeply I appreciated that presence. Now, standing here years later, I hope I have lived up to that standard. I know that feeling all too well. I was once the daughter who felt it was too final to take on, too impossible to face. I remember sitting in the same heavy silence, not knowing how to move forward without him. I know I cannot bring him back, but I can honor him every day in the way that I live. This work has always been bigger than me. It is my offering to him, a way to say thank you for shaping the way I see the world. It is to keep his memory alive, not just in my heart, but to every person who has to feel the way I did that day.

★ ★ ★

Taitem Marburger is pursuing her associate's degree with plans to transfer into mortuary science. Her interest in funeral service was shaped by personal loss and her work in a hospital operating room. Her writing reflects her commitment to compassion and care for others.

★ 2nd place ★



Backyard Mornings: A Sensory Journey through My Favorite Place

Written by **Elena Vazquez**

SHORT ESSAY

There are places in this world that we hold near and dear to our hearts.

They hold memories and emotions that stay with us whenever that place is revisited. The smells, the colors, and the feeling of the air can stick with someone. I lived in my grandparents’ house for the first four years of my life, and those four years imprinted the atmosphere of that house in my memory.

My grandparents had a large garage disconnected from their home. There was a structure connected to the garage and covered by its roof where my grandmother would sip her coffee every morning. Similar to a pergola, it was open to the morning air, but cut out of the corner of the garage, which overlooked her lawn and garden. The view of their yard in the spring and summer is one I’ll never forget.

Every morning, my grandmother would brew her almost-boiling dark coffee and my steaming tea in their respective mugs while I peeked over the tall counters. I watched as she would bring out the cups: her large striped coffee mug, and the special teacup blooming with pink flowers and green leaves that was reserved just for me. Her black coffee would turn to a golden tan as she poured flavored creamer into the cup.

Together, we would walk through the yard to the outdoor area under the roof of her garage while holding our cups. I remember opening the back door and looking out over their expansive yard of bright green, towards the garage and the tiny garden nestled between it and the tall, lean, aspen trees along the fringe of the yard.

When finally seated in our two tawny-colored wicker chairs with firm multicolor-striped cushions, we would look out onto the new morning we were enjoying together. I would watch brown and grey squirrels scurry across the rooftop of their mint blue home and survey the

thin, long aspen trees with their almost ashy sage-green circular leaves waving and rustling in the wind.

The wind would swish through the leaves on the trees and whistle around the corners and through the gutters of my grandparents’ large house. I could hear the scratching of squirrels’ nails against the tree bark and the roof of the garage. The peace would often be quietly interrupted by the sound of sipping from either me or my grandmother. Occasionally, the rustling of grass or leaves could be heard when a bunny or other small creature ran through the backyard or small garden. The reliable sound of footsteps and the soft tread of paws would fill the air whenever someone passed while walking their dog.

More than anything, though, I recall the sounds of birds chirping and singing in those early hours. Every morning, while wrapped in toasty blankets and sipping our warm drinks, my grandmother would try to silence my ever-yapping voice by telling me to “listen to the birds.” I can still hear those birds warbling and twittering in the trees and the sky above.

My grandma always added a little extra just for me, both to stave off sore throats and also because I took all my drinks extra sweet.

Through the passage of time, smell is the least reliable sense in my memories, but there are still many things I can recall from those early mornings. At the forefront was the unmistakable smell of my honey

vanilla chamomile tea. It was the only tea I drank well into my childhood.

Especially strong was the scent and taste of honey. My grandma always added a little extra just for me, both to stave off sore throats and also because I took all my drinks extra sweet. The tea tasted warm, inviting, and exceptionally sugary on those cool mornings. The sharp and almost bitter smell of coffee, easily recognizable, filled the air as it tends to do.

Occasionally, I would try my luck, and, like a toddler trying soda for the first time, I would take a sip of my grandmother’s coffee and immediately make a face, since it was too biting and acrid for my oversweetened taste buds. The smell of spring and fresh air covered all other scents like a blanket. To describe the fresh spring and

summer air is nearly impossible, as it is one of those scents that we cannot describe to others, but all know. As soon as we breathe it in, we recognize it immediately and are transported to memories of springs and summers past.

The feel of the breeze on my face and arms every morning was brought by this fresh air. The wind would fly through the trees, graze across my cheeks, and blow through my hair. I could feel the chill it would bring and remember cuddling close to my comfy, snug blanket in an attempt to keep any cold air out. Huddling my knees to my chest, the warm air inside would engulf my legs and fingertips.

When walking across the lawn, the sharp, quick pricks of blades of grass would scratch and caress my bare feet. The distinct feeling of morning dew covering my feet, turning them wet and cold, has always stuck with me. I would use the comforting blanket my grandmother had provided to wipe away the water and bits of grass from the bottom of my feet and to hide them from the chill air.

With my hot cup in my hands, I sipped at my tea, feeling

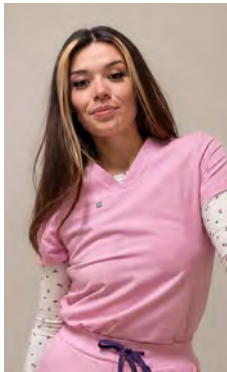
the warmth slide down my throat to my core, heating me from the inside out. Cupping the teacup close to myself, I would shake the cold off me from its heat. Letting it spread from my palms to my fingertips, warming my body and my heart at the same time.

Senses are how humans navigate the world. We develop strong associations between memories and our senses, whether it be smell, sight, sound, taste, or touch. The senses, and our memories attached to them, stay with us through the years. My grandmother was a comforting woman with whom I always felt safe. Those mornings adopted that feeling from her, and I remember them vividly because of that. While seasons change and years pass, the light breeze of a spring morning still brings me back to those mornings, safe and loved with my grandmother.

★ ★ ★

Elena Vazquez is pursuing an Associate of Arts degree at NICC with plans to transfer to a four-year college to study social work. When they aren't in class or studying, they are working at the public library in downtown Dubuque, or attempting (and failing) to make a dent in their ever-growing list of to-be-read books.

★ Honorable Mention ★



Postpartum: My Autobiography

Written by **Aliah Spencer**

SHORT ESSAY

It was me holding my newborn in what was supposed to be my safe haven, my bedroom, but instead felt like my soon-to-be coffin. Real drops of sweat were forming at my hairline. My heart was pounding so loud I couldn't even hear the calming white noise that my fan was emitting. My husband had just left for work, like he had countless times since our son was born. I was used to this. I knew my baby was okay. I knew my household was okay, but I was not. That is when I realized just how ignorant I had been, and how postpartum was not just difficult, it was swallowing me whole.

If you asked me how I was feeling at 35 weeks pregnant, I was ready. I was not just ready, I was eager. All of my son's bottles had been violently washed and disinfected. His clothes were neatly hung up in color-coded order. His stuffed gray dinosaur lay in his crib, alongside his soft knitted blanket that we were prepared to grab for whenever the little man wanted to make his arrival. Birthing stories on Youtube played continuously as I cleaned. Every box on my list had a bold, well deserved checkmark, but looking back now, all of that preparation feels almost laughable.

He made his arrival shortly afterward at 38 weeks. My birth treated me well, as did my entire pregnancy. Those three days in the hospital were nothing short of pure bliss. Love overran my body like a fire-soaked forest, and excitement followed as if it were the roaring smoke. We were ready to go home. Once we got home, the first couple days were as expected. I did not sleep much. I watched his tiny chest move up and down for hours. I checked his diaper as if it was my newest form of social media, but within days, I felt like a million bucks.

Love overran my body like a fire-soaked forest, and excitement followed as if it were the roaring smoke.

Somehow, week after week, it got better. I was healing, I was happy, and I was in love.

I was nearing 4 weeks postpartum. The confidence from me becoming a new mother had swaddled me with tenderness. I had started to learn my baby's soft cries and gentle coos. I started learning his sleep routines and that he hated his feet being covered. It was becoming increasingly clear why everyone loved this part so much. However, it was around that time that I could feel a pit in my stomach start to grow, like a seed that was ready to sprout into a giant beanstalk.

The first few times, it started with me mentioning that I just didn't feel great. I was double-checking my day, making sure I was not forgetting anything. "Food, check. Diapers, check. Owlet-sock, check." A sense of fear continued to linger, like a small tick latched to my leg that would soon devour me whole. Over the course of the next week, this feeling would come and go, while growing each time.

I was exactly 6 weeks postpartum. Melodic laughs filled my home. The comfort of my entire family spending the morning with me wrapped around me like a force field. For those few hours, it felt as though I was peering into the life I had eagerly awaited in those days before giving birth. Everyone eventually gave their kisses and said their goodbyes.

Following suit was my husband who was leaving for work. I was not scared of being alone. If anything, I almost preferred it.

Soon, the dooming feeling I had appeared quickly and sat on top of me like an elephant that had just stepped on my chest. I immediately grabbed my son and went upstairs, while hoping that the gentle sway of the rocking chair would rock my anxious mind back to ease. The trembling of my body vibrated my wood floors like a mini earthquake. The nausea was crawling up my throat as if it was laced with fire and equipped with barbed wire nails. I repeatedly reminded myself that I was okay. I looked around and confirmed that nothing was wrong, but my

nervous system believed otherwise. I couldn't contain the physical reactions my body was having.

It was like my body and my mind were on two different halves of the world. "I am okay, my baby is okay, I have food, water, diapers. Nothing is wrong!" I cried to myself as I knew I was losing it. I lay in bed. I was hoping gravity would hug me whole again, but it did not. My emotions quickly turned into a dark, horrifying reality. I started to see my walls actually moving closer and closer in. I could see my room getting smaller around me. My vision started to dim in an already loosely-lit room. It was not just a feeling anymore; it was real hallucinations. I was standing in the middle of postpartum psychosis, alone, with a 6-week-old baby.

When I saw my doctor, a sense of embarrassment started tapping on my shoulder. I was more than self-aware. I have worked in the healthcare field since I turned 16. I knew how these doctor visits play out: the nurses, the raised eyebrows, the humming fluorescent light that sang as the doctor wrote in his notes. His mile-long questionnaire got us no further, either. No, I was not worried or scared of my son's well-being. No, I never questioned my ability to mother him, and no, not once did I ever think I would hurt him or myself.

The same strong-willed, resilient mind that I had always prided myself in was still 100% present during these episodes. It was as if I was watching my life through a movie screen with no control over the director's lead. My life felt like a game of whack-a-mole where isolation, insanity, and anxiety were each taking their turn to relentlessly beat me up. I had no reason why, no solution, and I certainly did not know how to cope with it. Due to

that overwhelming sense of aloneness, I suddenly saw all mothers in a different light, while realizing just how ignorant I had been.

The height of my postpartum lasted about two months. After that, each day laid another brick of protection around my mind, sunlight slowly creeping back into a dark room, inching me toward a sense of self I thought was gone forever. The fear I had felt carved me an entirely new DNA sequence. I walked into motherhood with a new level of love, a new level of gratitude, and an immense amount of empathy for anyone who had struggled with mental health. I reached out to new mothers more. I checked on my friends more: in texts, in long phone calls, and in hugs that lingered. I became a lighthouse, while determined to wave a strong, bright beam so anyone drowning in the middle of the ocean knew I had seen them, and I was near. Postpartum softened every hard bristle about me. It was not just rough, it was life-altering.

★ ★ ★

Aliah Spencer is a mom to a 1-year-old boy. Motherhood trumps all of her other adventures, but aside from that, she runs a successful business with her partner. She is a full-time college student and will be celebrating her 10th year of working in the healthcare field in November!

★ 1st Place ★



The One Who Almost Got Away

Written by **Rebekah Halsey**

I love goats. I collect goats. I like all the different colors and markings. It makes me happy to see them munching away at the overgrown weeds in our pasture. It is relaxing, and I enjoy them very much. Needless to say, when I saw an ad that someone an hour away from us had some unique colored goats, I had to have them.

The initial visit went well. The goats were sweet and outgoing. I especially liked their speckled white fur with brown, black, and tan patches, which drew me to them in the first place. The lady selling them mentioned they loved grain and would never pass up a chance to get it, a typical goat characteristic.

Before we knew it, we were on the road home with our new goats. The babies were so relaxed, sitting in their spacious Rubbermaid container with nice, clean bedding and scrumptious hay to enjoy as we began our journey. We did not have any unique names for these unique goats, but by the time the day was over, we had names for them, alright.

The hot midmorning summer sun was up in its full glory by the time we arrived home from our long trip. I thought it would be okay if we put the babies in the grass. I have always done that with new babies. They would never go far, and since they were so well-behaved, I felt they would enjoy the break from the transport box as we unloaded from our vehicle.

The first one out was the smaller buck. He seemed to gladly stay with the kids, nibbling at the lush, green grass. The colorful buck was set down next. He sniffed the fresh ground for a split second and immediately took off. Dodging at every attempt to catch him, he ran under our cars, followed by his now-frantic brother. No matter which way we went, they went the other way.

I told my kids, "Get on each side of the vehicle."

My youngest son was two years old at the time and was not going to be much help, but he tried his best anyway. He chose the position in front of the vehicle. There he stood, in his little cowboy boots and jeans, ready to wrangle some goats. The colorful buck and little buck managed to keep just out of reach, as if playing cat and mouse. As we tried to coax the goats from under the vehicle, we nearly had the colorful buck, but then he saw his opportunity to escape. He chose the weakest link, my two-year-old. He sprang from under the vehicle, slipping by my son, and took off into the neighbor's nearby hay field. He looked like a white-tailed deer bouncing up and down in the tall grass as he began his escape.

After we jumped up from the dusty ground, I yelled to the kids, "Get the goat before he goes too far."

The three children took off in pursuit, leaving the little buck to stay under the vehicle. The kids were running as fast as their legs could go — when suddenly, I looked over

to see my oldest daughter's upper body going faster than her legs. Time seemed to slow down as she slammed to the ground like a test dummy.

"Are you all right?" I yelled with concern.

"NO! I just tripped on the stupid molehills! The field is full of them!" my daughter shouted in desperation, holding her injured leg and dusting the

dirt off her clothes.

The little goat took this advantage to gain ground away from the children. I ran over to my daughter as she lay there in agony. Molehills were scattered across the field, some sunk into the overworked ground. My oldest son continued to run after the goat, watching his foot placement as he ran, to avoid reenacting his sister's defeat, with his little brother following behind.

I watched as my youngest son fell to the ground, taken down by another molehill. I finally called off the children, seeing that they were getting hurt, and there was no way

They would never go far, and since they were so well-behaved, I felt they would enjoy the break from the transport box as we unloaded from our vehicle.

my oldest son was going to catch up with the goat.

"Go back and wait at home," I instructed the kids.

I could see the goat running farther and farther away, and us chasing him was motivation for him to keep running. We have had goats escape before. I knew that if I went around and got ahead of him, then approached him from behind, he would likely head back to the house. If he saw a glimpse of his brother, who was now by the gate, it would lure him to follow, and then this would end the chase.

I hurried as fast as I could to get ahead of him and started walking back to the colorful buck to steer him back. By the time I had him back in the right direction, here came the disregarding kids to attempt to help again. The goat spotted the kids and decided he was not going to be caught that easily. He ran between us and down by the fence line into the multiflora roses and thick weeds. I tried to peek through the bushes and young trees to see if the goat had been caught by the thorny stems. I could see him rushing along the fence line. I tried keeping pace with the goat until I lost track of his colorful fur.

I hollered to the children, "Go tell Dad to grab some grain and bring it to me. I'm going to see if I can get to him."

The kids ran off to tell Dad as I kept trying to catch the evasive escapee. I found a spot where I could slip through the fence to the gravel road. I was terrified I would not get to the goat in time, afraid someone would run him over. On the gravel road, I scanned the fence line, tracking where the goat had gone. I heard a loud engine, a cue that my husband was driving up to me with the four-wheeler.

"Here is the grain. You think he will really go for that?" my husband questioned.

"Not sure, but the lady said they would come to grain," I answered.

You want a ride?" he asked.

At this point, I was running on adrenaline and anger. "NO! Go ahead of me and see if you can spot him."

My husband flew down the road. After what seemed like forever, I could hear my husband picking up speed. I looked down the winding road to see the little goat sprinting towards me. Here is my chance, I thought. I carefully tried to plan the goat's capture with the short amount of time I had. As soon as the goat saw me, he came to an abrupt halt. I shook the grain.

"Here, baby, come here, it's okay, little guy," I reassured the colorful goat.

The goat was petrified. I could tell by his wild eyes that he was trying to figure out a way to once again keep away from me. I was inching closer. Ten feet became five feet, then three feet. I was so close to him. I just needed to get a

little closer to grab him.

The goat remained motionless as I crept closer. As soon as I extended my arm out to catch him, down in the thicket he went again.

I screamed out to my husband, "He went back toward the field!"

My husband turned around and started down the road again until he came to an overgrown driveway leading to the field. His eyes searched the area until he tracked down the baby goat. He made a wide turn to try chasing the goat towards the direction of our house. The attempt was unsuccessful when the goat went back down into the thicket in the opposite direction.

With me still by the road, I waited patiently for a sign that my husband had things under control. He did not.

Out darted the goat running down the gravel again, headed towards the steep hill leading to the valley. The goat found his opportunity to take the next right on a low-maintenance road. I ran as fast as I possibly could in a last effort to get him. He ran faster. I would stop, and then he would stop. I ran. He ran. I just could not seem to keep up.

In my thoughts, I wished at that point I had something to throw at the goat to knock him out, so I could drag him home, much like a caveman. Or a nicer way, for him to be a fainting goat, and I could simply scare him and he would drop. He stopped and looked back at me when I stopped to take a break. I could hardly breathe from all the running. Sweat was pouring off me, my hair and clothes were damp from sweat, and the sun was now beating down on me.

My husband drove beside me. In between breaths, I told him, "This is ridiculous! Bologna that they come to grain. That lady is crazy." My husband gave me a break and tried driving the four-wheeler towards the goat again, which made him run farther.

My husband raced back to me. "He keeps running. I'm not sure what to do."

I gave my answer quickly, "You know what, at this point, this A-hole can have his luck with the coyotes!" As soon as I said that, the A-hole started walking back towards us.

My husband said, "I'm going to try one more time to see if I can get behind him. He has to be exhausted by now."

I agreed angrily. "Try. I'm done running. He's going to have to find his own way back otherwise."

I watched as my husband cautiously drove a wide path around the goat and got behind him. The goat was coming back towards me. I quickly speed-walked to the intersection to block off the road leading down the steep gravel hill into the valley. My husband continued to slowly drive the goat towards the house.

I wished at that point I had something to throw at the goat to knock him out, so I could drag him home, much like a caveman.

"Want a ride now?" my husband asked sympathetically.

"Nope. Keep the goat going," I said with exhaustion. I walked the rest of the way to the house— beet red, sweating, breathless, and cussing.

As I arrived at the start of our property, some of our neighbors, driving their side-by-sides, came to a crawl on the road. They had missed the show. I gave a neighborly wave to hopefully provide the confused riders with the okay that my husband did not intentionally leave me on the side of the road to walk home.

I started up our driveway to see another scene unfolding. My husband and kids were now chasing both goats around the house.

When I saw both goats running towards the field again, I ran up yelling, "Stop, stop! Leave them. They are at least in the yard. Let's wait until they get by one of the gates to our pasture, and we can corral them in. Put grain in there."

Sure enough, it did not take long before both goats ran

into the open gate to get the grain.

"Shut the gate!" I shouted.

SLAM! The sound of the gate closing was one of the best sounds of that moment. Finally!

With the gate shut, the chase came to an end. We retold the nightmare to each other from our own perspectives, hashing out the details, and wondering how in the world that goat was not exhausted from galloping around the countryside.

In the end, we all mutually decided that from now on, we will drive the truck through the gate into the fenced-in pasture, and THEN let the goats out. We rehydrated ourselves from all the chasing and watched as our new goats, A-hole and Cuddles, ate their grain quietly in their secure pen.

★ ★ ★

Rebekah Halsey is currently enrolled in the nursing program at NICC. After earning her RN degree, she plans to continue serving her hometown community of Edgewood at the Convalescent Home, where her passion for caring for others first began in 2009. In her free time, Rebekah enjoys spending time with her husband and four children while caring for the many animals that make up their beloved "funny farm."

★ 2nd Place ★



Medallions & Memories

Written by **Jensen Beaton**

“Well, this is it Jen,” my dad said as my heels clicked against the cold concrete of the entrance to the

auditorium. It was the second annual 222’s Fastpitch graduation banquet, and I was a part of it. The hall had a red and black theme decorated with 2’s memorabilia from previous years. Standing on the stage were three of the most important men in my softball career: Keith “Tosh” Mackintosh, Dean Holoien, and Ryan “Rayyzor” Ray.

Seeing them next to the stack of medallions made me feel emotions I had never felt before. In a few short hours, my time as a 2 would be over. My farewell from 222’s Fastpitch barred mourning and grace—the mourning of leaving such an important part of my life behind, and the grace of experiencing something that had enough significance to be longed for.

For an early March afternoon, the weather was mild. I had been going through months of temperatures reaching negative thirty degrees, but I was used to it because it happens every year in Canada. Considering that I was attending a formal event, I was dressed in my best winter attire. I had on a skintight, just past knee-length black dress with silky nylon tights.

If it had been any colder, I would have had to wear a huge lined jacket with warm, fuzzy boots rather than my light jacket and black high heels. Thankfully it was not icy outside, or else I would have fallen into a snowbank with my heels nearly touching the sky. I was not very skilled in the walking on stilettos department. However, having something else to focus on made me shift my attention away from the thing I had been dreading yet looking forward to for five years: graduating from 2’s.

The 2025 banquet was unique compared to the first annual. Not only was my graduating class being celebrated, it was also the ten-year anniversary of the 222’s Fastpitch program. The decorations were superb.

There was not a blank space on the wall; every jersey from the beginning of the program to the most recent was hung proudly. On each table were winnings from tournaments over the last decade. Whether trophies, plaques, or medals, it was an honor to have any on a table. The whole environment surrounding the event brought comfort, something all of the graduates needed to get through the night. Additionally, I knew that I would need a cold beverage, good food, and the company of my best friends.

Once I sat down at my reserved table, I went up to the drink stand with my best friend, Peyton, to get a crisp Coke Zero. When we arrived, Rayyzor was there with an ice cold beer in hand. We started to annoy him within seconds of getting there, but we knew deep down that he would miss us more than anything. Somehow, it was not always that way; I was terrified of Rayyzor in my first year with the 2’s. He always looked grumpy, so I avoided all interactions possible. Little did I know that he was the biggest teddy bear. Peyton and I made it our mission to make sure he knew we thought that about him.

“I am telling you girls, I will not be crying tonight. I am just going to sit around and laugh while I watch the other guys cry,” Rayyzor said to us as he took a sip of his beer.

Immediately, I called him out. Rayyzor was a mess at the previous banquet, and there were a few 2025 graduates who were like a daughter to him. I knew he would not be able to contain his emotions.

“Rayyzor, I bet that you will be one of the first to cry,” I replied with a cheeky grin on my face.

He looked at me and shook his head at my smirk because he knew I was right. It was refreshing to be able to joke around with someone I had looked up to during my teenage years.

Eventually, it was time to indulge in delicious food catered from a local restaurant. The graduating class had expected the usual for a banquet: lukewarm lasagna with a side of Caesar salad and garlic toast. However, it was a pleasant surprise to see steam floating through the air above roast beef, carrots, cabbage rolls, and mashed potatoes. I loaded

*“Rayyzor, I bet that you will be one of the first to cry,”
I replied with a cheeky grin on my face.*

LONG ESSAY

up my plate with everything that looked appetizing and took it back to my table. Conversations were shared over the meal time, but once Tosh tapped on the microphone to get the attention of everyone, the food I had just devoured nearly came up in an instant.

Before the medallions were presented to graduates, there was an award ceremony for scholarships within the program. I was filled with nervousness as the scholarships I had applied for would be announced during the next five minutes. The 2's Mom Bursary was the scholarship I was hoping to win. It had taken me hours to write the essay because I wanted it to be perfect. Unfortunately, it would be the last award to be revealed before the medallion presentation. In the meantime, my emotions were rumbled as I listened to the gratitude expressed for Shaye Amundson during her memorial scholarship announcement.

I was taken aback when I heard Dean announce, "I am proud to say that the winner of this year's Shaye Amundson Memorial Scholarship is Jensen Beaton!"

The crowd erupted in applause. Everybody was cheering for me, but I cannot remember how it felt. I completely blacked out. This award is something that I will remember forever. Shaye Amundson is a cherished athlete in my province. She was a part of the 222's Fastpitch team as well as my local minor softball association in Prince Albert.

Unfortunately, a few days after Shaye graduated high school, she got in a terrible car accident and passed away. She had the ultimate athletic build: tall, skinny, and long legs that could run like the wind. Although I did not know Shaye personally, people described her as someone who filled the softball field with passion as soon as her cleats touched the dirt. Being honored in Shaye's name was the ultimate accomplishment; it meant far more than the 2's Mom's Bursary, and I could not calm down.

I had finally relaxed after winning the scholarship when it was down to three graduates to be farewelled, and I had not yet received my medallion. There was a pause in the presentation because Tosh planned to announce the next two graduates, rather than rotating through each one before. I knew that Tosh would be giving me my medallion, and every memory shared between us came rushing back. Tosh was very approachable when he was my coach, and was always willing to give feedback regarding softball and mental skills. He preached the idea that he would much rather we go all out and make physical errors, rather than be tentative and make mental errors. In our relationship, his biggest fear was that I would stay in Canada and play softball, because he saw the potential in me for softball in America.

My emotions stayed contained until the moment I heard Tosh choke up and say, "Oh this kid... Stop it. I can honestly say that this kid has got to be one of the most

improved players in our program." Then I was in shambles.

Having a coach who I had aspired to be as a player say such things meant everything. Tosh was the coach who called me before my third year in the program to tell me that I would be cut if I did not put in more effort. I did not take those words lightly. I started to do everything with pure intentions, and it paid off. My final two years with 222's Fastpitch cemented who I was as a player. I was always willing to lay out and dive to make a play, even if it meant that my uniform would be stained. Relentless scrubbing of softball pants made it all worth it to make the play — for not only my softball teammates, but also the program.

Being honored in Shaye's name was the ultimate accomplishment... and I could not calm down.

My eyes were so puffed up due to the tears that I could not see clearly. I tried to smile for pictures, but my puffy eye bags pushed up into my sight lines, and my eyes could barely open. At that point, I had given up on looking presentable for photos. In addition to the eye bags, I had

tear stained cheeks; my makeup was coming off as the tears rolled down my face. However, the look on my fellow graduates' faces as the crowd applauded me calmed me down. I knew that these girls would support me for life.

The final name was called, and I realized that my 222's Fastpitch career was over. Suddenly, my first tournament performance did not seem so terrible. At the end of the day, it did not matter that I made five errors in my first game as a 2 because I climbed out of that hole. I did not let my softball career collapse because of one game; I persevered. Every tear that I had just cried belonged to the 2's, and I would not have it any other way.

Throughout my 222's Fastpitch career, I discovered who I was as a softball player and as a person. If I had not been confronted by Tosh with what I needed to improve on, then I would not be playing softball at NICC today. My behaviors correlate with each other; I strive to be my best in an all-out fashion because I know I only get one chance in life. Tosh gave me one chance, and I rode off of it for years. Understanding myself has been extremely helpful while living on my own, and will continue to guide me in my future endeavors.

★ ★ ★

Jensen Beaton is in the Exercise Science and Kinesiology program at NICC. She is an international student athlete from Canada playing softball. After NICC, Jensen plans to transfer to a university where she will continue her collegiate softball career while completing a bachelor's degree in Kinesiology. Her end goal is to move back to Canada and finish her schooling to become a physical therapist.

★ Honorable Mention ★



Nurse Interview: Nursing is a Work of Heart

Written by **Chloye Gmur**

Nursing is a profession that extends beyond performing technical skills. It requires emotional strength, clinical judgment, compassion, and the ability to adapt to constantly changing patient needs. To better understand the realities of nursing practice, I interviewed a registered nurse, S.G., who has approximately four years of nursing experience and works in a hospital setting.

The purpose of this paper is to explore S.G.'s personal perspective on the nursing profession, including her background, two major issues facing nursing today, her responses to two nursing-related questions, and my personal reflection on what I learned from the interview.

Nurse Background

S.G. is a registered nurse who earned an associate degree in nursing from a community college in the Midwest. She is currently continuing her education toward a bachelor's degree, with plans to pursue a master's degree in the future. She works in a hospital environment and typically works three 12-hour shifts per week.

With approximately four years of experience in nursing, S.G. has seen how patient needs, staffing levels, and professional expectations have changed, even over a relatively short period of time. In addition to her clinical work, she has served as a mentor to newer nurses, helping them adjust to the hardships of professional practice (S.G., personal communication, January 2026).

Nursing Staff Shortages

S.G. explained that one of the most serious issues facing nursing today is the ongoing shortage of nurses while patient numbers continue to rise. She expressed concern about the future, especially as the aging population grows

and more people require healthcare. According to S.G., there are simply not enough nurses to safely care for the increasing number of patients, which creates stress for both staff and patients (S.G., personal communication, January 2026).

This concern reflects more than just busy workdays. When there are not enough nurses on a unit, each nurse is responsible for more patients, often with complex medical needs. This situation leads to fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and a higher risk of errors.

Staffing shortages also discourage people from staying in the profession, which worsens the problem over time. S.G.'s perspective highlights how workforce unpredictability threatens both nurse wellbeing and patient safety.

Increasing Acuity & Lack of Preventive Care

Another major issue S.G. identified is the increasing severity of patient illnesses, combined with limited preventive care. She explained that patients today are much sicker than they were in the past, often presenting with chronic and complex conditions that require advanced treatment. Instead of focusing on education and prevention, the healthcare system tends to treat

problems only after they have already developed (S.G., personal communication, January 2026).

S.G. used diabetes as an example, explaining that many people could avoid or delay serious health problems through nutrition counseling and education, yet they often receive care only after complications occur (S.G., personal communication, January 2026). This delayed care leads to more intensive hospital care and greater strain on nurses. As patient acuity increases, nurses must manage more complicated cases while also facing staffing shortages, making their work more demanding than ever.

Nursing Education

One question I asked S.G. was what nursing education prepares students well for, and what it fails to prepare them for. She explained that nursing programs do a

Patients today are much sicker than they were in the past, often presenting with chronic and complex conditions that require advanced treatment.

strong job of teaching physical and technical skills, such as performing procedures and following protocols. New graduates often feel confident completing hands-on tasks because of this training (S.G., personal communication, January 2026).

However, S.G. also noted that nursing education does not always prepare students for the emotional and psychological demands of the profession, or for complex clinical reasoning. She believes that many new nurses struggle to connect symptoms, diagnoses, and patient conditions in real-life situations, even if they know how to perform skills (S.G., personal communication, January 2026).

This gap can make the transition from student to practicing nurse challenging, often leaving new nurses feeling unprepared for the reality of clinical decision-making and the emotional weight that comes with caring for patients independently. It shows the need for stronger preparation that bridges the gap between knowledge, critical thinking, and the emotional realities of patient care.

What Makes a Good Nurse

Another question I asked S.G. was how her definition of a good nurse has changed over time. She explained that earlier in her career, being a good nurse meant completing tasks and following routines. Now, she believes a good nurse focuses on the patient, rather than simply finishing a checklist (S.G., personal communication, January 2026).

S.G. also emphasized that empathy, communication, and emotional awareness are essential qualities in nursing. She shared that a mentor early in her career made a positive impact by creating a safe space for learning and encouraging questions without judgment.

That experience shaped how she now supports others in the profession, and shows how important mentorship is in nursing. It not only changed S.G.'s nursing career, but also encourages her to pass on that same experience to someone who is in the same position she was (S.G., personal communication, January 2026).

Reflection

What stands out most is the emotional reality of nursing that is often not fully understood until it is experienced. Nursing is not only about knowing what to do, but it is also about carrying the emotional weight that comes with caring for people during some of the most vulnerable moments of their lives.

Technical skill alone is not enough. Being present, aware, and compassionate plays an equally important role in patient care, and without that, something essential is missing.

The perspective that S.G. shared also highlights how deeply human connection is woven into nursing. Patients are not just diagnoses or tasks to be completed. They are individuals with fears, stories, and emotions that deserve to be acknowledged.

The moments that leave the strongest impact are often not the procedures performed, but the times when a patient feels heard, comforted, and understood. That realization reinforces how important it is to approach nursing with both knowledge and genuine empathy.

The importance of mentorship is another powerful takeaway. Having someone who creates a safe space for learning, encourages growth, and leads without judgment can shape not only confidence, but an entire career. Support within the profession matters, especially in an environment that can be overwhelming and demanding. That kind of influence does not just affect one person, but it also continues through how that individual chooses to support others moving forward.

This interview brought me a deeper understanding of what nursing truly requires. It is not an easy profession, and it is not meant to be. The challenges, both physical and emotional, are what give the work its meaning. Strength, patience, and resilience are necessary, but so is the ability to remain compassionate even in difficult situations.

More than anything, this experience reinforces that nursing is not defined by completed tasks or checked boxes, but by the impact left on the people receiving care. The difference between a nurse and a truly great nurse is not found in what is done, but in how deeply another human being feels seen, safe, and cared for in their presence. That is why nursing is a work of heart.

★ ★ ★

Chloye Gmur is a student in the nursing program at NICC and currently works as a CNA while continuing her education in healthcare. Inspired by both the science and compassion behind nursing, she hopes to one day work in critical care and continue advancing her education in the field. Outside of the classroom, Chloye enjoys traveling, new experiences, and being with family, especially her cat!

★ 1st Place ★



Bewitched Dreams or Destiny

Written by **Harmoney Snyder**

Buried within the depths of the treacherous cold and heavy snowfall, an old couple drives slowly along a gravel road. The crunching of the snow beneath the tires can be heard through the thick trees lining the ground. Expectedly, due to their horrible fear of skidding off the road, they are sure to watch carefully for the thick ice. As they flick their brights on, the older scrunches her eyes. Lurching back in her seat, she makes an urgent remark, “George, pull over! There’s someone on the side of the road!” This leads the old couple to park alongside the young, shivering woman, slowly.

“You must be so cold. Be thankful for that puffy snowsuit of yours,” the husband’s old, gruff voice speaks with concern. He notes the state of this young woman, with her skin turning blue and white, seemingly from hypothermia.

“Come on, love, let’s get you in the car and warm you up. Lord knows how long you’ve been out here,” the wife speaks with a soft and comforting voice. Grasping the hands of the young woman, she feels as though being impaled by ice once touching her frigid skin. The wife leads her to the couple’s beat-up Dodge. “What’s your name, sweetheart? Where are you from?”

“I can’t. Why do they torment me? Why can’t I remember anything?” the young woman stammers. With an attempt to maul at the skin of her forearms, the thick sleeves of her coat block her attack. It’s as if she wants to remove the very flesh from her bones. “I did what they asked me to do! They said they’d leave me alone if followed through!” She screams, in utter hysterics. With bulging, bloodshot eyes, and tears freezing on her cheek, she collapses, falling into unconsciousness.



How come I can’t see anything? Where am I? I think within the impending darkness, hearing my own voice bounce and echo off unidentifiable walls. I reach up, touching the soft and silky hair of mine, which falls over my shoulders. Holding my hands out, I can barely see the soft yet golden color of my skin. “This feels surreal,” I whisper.

An unidentifiable voice murmurs behind me. “Look, we are unsure of what happened to Rachel. All we know is that what happened to your daughter is serious. Based on what the couple that brought her in claimed, she may have suffered memory loss. However, she will make a smooth recovery once she wakes up.” Its repetitive echo of voice makes my ears ring in pain.

When I wake up? What does that mean? Who is that? I whisper in the stillness of my brain.

“My poor baby, I wish I could wake you up and hug you tightly, like I used to do when you were a little girl,” a woman’s voice quivers. “My little girl. If I could only get in contact with Carter. I don’t know where that boy is at.” I feel tears prick at the corner of my eyes for an unknown reason.

“Mom? Is that my mom?” I speak with a trembling voice, feeling the icy tear roll down my cheek. Suddenly, I feel alone, as though everyone left the room that holds my unconscious body, leaving me with pondering thoughts and guttural emptiness.

*“Mom? Is that my mom?”
I speak with a trembling voice,
feeling the icy tear roll down
my cheek.*

A crystal-clear voice pierces the deafening silence, “It’s all your fault!” The harsh ringing hits me hard. “You’re worthless.” An echo ripples from behind me, close enough that I feel a gust of breath brush against my ear.

Swinging around, “Who the hell are you? Why won’t you leave me alone?!” Being met with the absence of life other than my own, I question who these voices belong to. *Damn it, they were just right behind me,* I cry, feeling the tears in my eyes once again. However, the sound of shouting and bellowing music disrupts my thoughts. Pushing the tears back and taking a deep

breath, “What the hell?” I mutter to myself as I exhale.

I turn to see a doorway with flashing lights, pulling me as if roping me in, like a dog who smelt a steak, relying solely on its simple senses to lead it. Walking towards the door, I feel as though floating on a cloud, unable to touch my feet on the floor. Reaching the archway, I turn to look beyond the frame, being met with a school gymnasium. One that is outlined with large banners reading ‘Prom 2002.’ Balloons and dozens of people litter the room. I take note of the blurred faces that stare at me whilst walking into the gym. While they continue their gawking, the music takes over my thoughts. Ignoring the dreadful heads turned my way, I look down to see the elegant and slick lavender-purple dress that cascades past my ankles.

As I walk further into the dark room, I begin to dance with an unfamiliar man, whose face holds a blur as well. As though waltzing into his hold, the song “*I Don’t Want to Miss a Thing*” by Aerosmith comes on. I’m a fragile piece of stained glass in the man’s arms, full of imperfections, beauty, and ready to shatter at any moment. I feel as though wrapped in a warm blanket of comfort and security, provided by the arms of this man.

Suddenly, I hear the voices again, their flat, sharp, and distasteful tone. However, one sticks out, hosting a hushed voice: “Why are you like this? Why can’t you be normal?” The abruption causes me to look around the room. I spot a tall man — similar to the very man I am embraced by — standing in the corner of the room, surrounded by nothing but thick air.

His frosted hair is stiff with snow and ice, and his nose and ears hold icicles. His skin is whiter than a ghost, with shades of red glittering over his features. His white lips move to the very words that have been racking my mind for the past several months.

The figure in the corner of the room suddenly consumes my thoughts, the man who embraces me a faraway thought. He begins to walk towards me, his face becoming more dysmorphic as the distance separating us closes. With a low gurgled grunt, “Just wait until I kill you,” he hisses with venom dripping from his tongue.

Causing me to jolt in response as if knocking my feet right from under me, I fall backward. My eyes shoot wide open, and I suddenly fall onto a soft cushion, as if resting on a cloud. I begin to examine the newly discovered room I unknowingly dove into due to my fall.

I am enclosed in empty walls covered in a creamy white pigment. The room holding no personality to it other than a coffee table holding a small flat-screen TV, allowing me to look at my own reflection. Looking at myself, I notice my slightly disheveled hair. “Bedhead? Really?”

“I think you look beautiful as always,” a masculine yet soft voice notes from behind me. I go to turn my head;

however, I cannot move. Gazing into the darkened television screen, I notice the man I was dancing with seemingly less than two minutes ago.

His blurred face makes me question who he is even more. “Are you excited to finally have a place to ourselves?” I ask. However, it was not me that spoke. Yes, it came from my mouth, but I didn’t speak those words, as if reliving a memory.

“Why, of course, I am,” speaks a voice that shifts from sweet and caring to rough and mocking. Looking through the screen, I see the same chilled man from the corner of the previous memory. He emerges from behind the wall the blurred-faced man was just leaning against. His pale, grey face appears clearer than I had previously seen. The thick icicles are longer than before.

With an audible and shaky gasp, I slam my eyes closed. Hoping to again see the unknown yet comforting man that once stood there. However, as my eyes flutter open, I realize I am no longer placed on the comfy sofa, needing to solely rely on a blackened void to guide my perception of the surroundings.

I am wrapped in a blanket of ice, feeling as though stripped of any warmth that was once provided. Taking in my surroundings, I squint due to the impending darkness of the night. I notice the thick and dense trees that cascade for seemingly miles. Beautiful yet unsettling snowflakes flurry in front of my face, with thick layers of snow covering the ground. I lift my hands to feel my face, the skin hard and ice-cold to the touch. I come to the realization I am inside a vehicle.

What am I doing in a snowmobile? A side-by-side nonetheless? I question. Once I see no need for me to be here anymore, I unbuckle the seatbelt, the steering wheel keeping me from falling forward. I feel compelled to look to the right. My face contorts into one of shock and horror, seeing a man slumped over the dash of the snowmobile. The man has white skin and icicles that hang from his nose and ears, resembling the man who has been horrifying me.

However, it creates no effect on me, completely unphased by the deceased man that lay next to me. Beginning with my left foot, I retreat from the vehicle. My foot — protected by the thick boots my mother forced me into — hits the soft, yet dense snow settled on the ground. The freezing air causes me to shiver as an attempt to increase body heat once again. As the wind picks up, it throws snow flurries into my face, resulting in sharp pains. Trucking through the thick layers of snow, I begin to hear rustling within the snow-flooded bushes.

His frosted hair is stiff with snow and ice, and his nose and ears hold icicles.

What could be out here in this cold? Whatever it is must be injured or something, I wonder to myself.

Looking behind me, I see the vehicle and the man slowly disappearing in the distance. Seeing my footprints quickly flood with snow, I realize I must have walked almost a mile. Hearing the noises suddenly becoming louder, I halt in my current position.

Twigs snap and snow crunches compactly under unseen feet. I begin slowly spinning in circles. "What are you and what do you want?!" I shout, feeling paranoid that someone is watching me.

"Oh darling, you know who I am. I've missed you," a familiar voice speaks, causing me to spin my body around, now unsure of which way the nearest road would be. I see a man waltz out from behind a tree, the beautiful man whom I was dancing with and who was standing in the gorgeous yet unfinished apartment. However, he's not looking at me as expected. He's looking towards the sheet of snow that covers the ground.

"Who are you? And why have you been stalking me? And where... where am I?" I stammer through questions with no room for him to speak. The feeling in my hands and face starts to go numb.

"Rachel, I cannot tell you, I shall show you," he finishes. I see his head begin to rise before ultimately making eye contact with me.

All of my memories come flooding back like a broken dam releasing its water. The magnificent memories as a child playing in the swimming hole near my home, all my school dances and the beautiful dresses that corresponded, moving into my first apartment, and finally but most importantly, I remember him. My best friend, my sidekick, my lover.

"Carter? W-Wait. Aren't you in the snowmobile? How did you end up here, and completely unharmed?" I begin to question with confusion. The cold, frosty air pouring from my mouth with every breath.

"I told you, I'd let you see. And that... that's a little more complicated." He smiles, beginning to walk closer towards me. However, he moves through the snow with no struggle. The snow lets his legs wander freely of the gravitational weight.

"Okay, well, since that question was answered, onto the next one. How the hell did I end up here again? All of this..." I pause in an attempt to catch my breath, gesturing to the atmosphere around me. "I've already lived this. I'm meant to be in a hospital bed unconscious right now."

After the mention of a hospital bed leaves my lips, I begin to hear the steady thumping of a heart monitor, causing me to look around in confusion.

"Well, the unconscious mind can really do wonders. Who knows, I may just be a figment of your imagination, and

you may just be dreaming this whole thing." Carter speaks with a hint of disdain in his voice, causing me to become slightly concerned.

As I try to walk backward and away from Carter, I notice his features begin to shift into those of unsettling ones. His face begins to turn white, his eyes becoming bloodshot red. The beginning of icicles form and drip from his nose. I make the connection. "You're not the Carter I know and love. You're the voices that have been consuming my thoughts," I speak harshly.

"Awe, you finally made the connection, you sweet and precious dumpster fire." His voice turns into that ominous one, speaking in a rough and deep tone.

"What did I do to you? I thought we were happy?" I question.

"What did you do?!" He pauses, making his way towards me before shouting, "YOU KILLED ME! THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!" With the deep bass of his voice, he causes the last few birds that were perched in the trees to fly off in terror.

"Me?! I did this to you?! You're the one who told me to drive into the tree! You put me behind the wheel!

You wanted me to kill us! So, we can be together forever, you said!" I begin to raise my voice out of pure rage and spite. Causing the sound of the distance heartbeat monitor to increase its pace.

"Well, now that I'm dead and I have you at my mercy, we can be together," he speaks as he lunges towards me, grasping my shoulder. Once the connection is made,

I feel the shivering cold disappear, that once warm and cozy feeling returning.

"Come here, sweetheart," I hear the soft and lovely voice of Carter speak from behind me.

My eyes wide, I halt and begin to turn. "Carter, is that really you?" I see the angelic and glowing face of the boy I have loved for years.

"Yes, now come on, let's get you to safety." I look back at the deceased, stone-cold Carter that stands there with a hard face. Coming to the realization that I am stuck with two options as if in limbo— following the Carter I abandoned at the crash, or the lively, happy version of him.

Looking straight again, I make eye contact with the warm and comforting Carter once again. Concluding that the decision is obvious.

The air that surrounds us becomes that of the darkness of night and turns into daylight. However, while I begin to walk my way toward Carter, it becomes so bright that all I can see is him. Completely ignoring the impeding sound of the heart monitor, I walk into the arms of the sweet boy, feeling at ease and wrapped in comfort. "I love you," Carter speaks into my ear.

He moves through the snow with no struggle. The snow lets his legs wander freely of the gravitational weight.

"I love you too," I return. Hearing the monotone and high-pitched flatline.

In the echoing voices of my mother that once sounded while alone in the pitch black emerged again. "No, my baby! Get the doctor! I need a doctor!"

Hearing the voices of my mother is a distant thought, completely consumed by Carter's warmth in the opposingly freezing woods. And with that, I fall into a spiral of memories and dreams, and the once-lively feeling turns to nothing, just a bottomless void. Allowing me to succumb to my destined fate.

★ ★ ★

Harmoney Snyder is a first generation college student getting her general education credits before transferring to UW-Platteville. She wishes to become a forensic investigator after watching too much *Criminal Minds* growing up. If not reading a cheesy romance novel, you'll find Harmoney outside with her dogs playing fetch. She believes that blaring music while driving around always helps lift the mood.

★ 2nd Place ★



The Coin Collector

Written by Tyler Bly

*Each year is measured by a tooth.
This was the old way of aging.
The more you have...
The longer your tooth.*

Do not call on him at death or birth without an offering. He lives eternal, sucking the life force out of bone marrow, teeth, skulls, and eyes. Rare money may persuade him, but it is a deal with a devil. Lest he take you and your soul there himself, you best have an offering.



Bill passed away at 5:16 a.m. on March 31st, on a brisk predawn morning. His family was all long gone by now; he'd waited for a decade for this closing moment. He had finally earned the reprieve at the miserly age of 101.

Ethel had caught the illness back in 2016, and Bill had never quite recovered. He passed away violently with a massive embolism, a fortune, and a rare coin collection with nobody to give it too.

And nobody cared.

The world painted in stoney black. Darkness rolls over and around Bill as he opens his eyes.

"I can grant you passage... To then. You know...? Then. That moment, and for a king's ransom or a piece of Judas, you can re-live it."

A dank odor fills the air. A bioluminescent glow threatens and emanates from the darkness around him, and he can barely make out the markings of a small boat surrounding him. Bill doesn't understand what's going on. A lost

He opens it up to find the coins that he had won at the auction last year, said to be from the Middle Ages, possibly older.

confusion sets in. Last thing he remembered was... was? That intense headache all night long, and then, and then. Smashing his head off the sink. All the warm blood flowing.

There was a stank weight in the silent rotten air. Was he dreaming? The deep voice beckons from the neon darkness.

"What say you?"

Bill's confusion now has worn off into an inescapable terror. "What kind of monster are you!? Who are you? Where am I? What is going on!?"

The figure never quite comes into focus; however, Bill can see his dark odorous eyes quite clearly.

"I have many names. What good will they do you now? How do you honor me?" he booms. "The children honor me with their teeth, the Mayans honor me with their virgins, and the poor honor me with their tithes. How shall you honor me!?" he demands with a putrid stench.

Meekly, Bill swallows everything, pride side down, and cranes as far back against the boat railing as possible. Scampering, he fumbles around tooling for something, anything to offer, immense fear swelling up inside him.

He quickly pats his pockets and finds a large lump on his breast. Pulling it out, Bill finds a hemp woven bag that jingles, marked darkly with a symbol he fails to recognize.

He opens it up to find the coins that he had won at the auction last year, said to be from the Middle Ages, possibly older. Shocked and relieved. His heart tempers down a notch.

"NOW!" The soul-lit darkness rages.

Bill tosses the sack across the boat to a skeletal hand, but dares not move half an inch closer. A violent hiss fills the air, burning Bill's eardrums. The pressure building in his head again, and a blinding flash. For a brief instant, Bill believes he can see his skeletal shipmate, but the brightness is too intense, and the sunburst sears his closed eyes shut.

Bill inhales the familiar world: hot apple pie and warm cinnamon rolls rest on the well-set table. Silky golden rays are beaming through the windows, filling his soul like the

old days. Bluebirds chirp merrily, casting their joy onto the day. He can hear commotions of people and family, loved ones and lost ones.

Most are silent, in a distance, but they are there. They see him. Their eyes scream truth and love in colors of crimson and blue. Hugs. Love. Warmth. Knowledge that they were well. Will be well.

And then Ethel. "My God!" Bill screams. "I have missed you for so long. I can't wait to be with you. You're my everything, my world! Tell me all is well. How are you!?" Tears stream down his weathered face.

Silent sharp shapes snap him back, as the pain and darkness set in upon the dingy waves. Extreme screams rage from Bill's chest. He looks down to find half of his rib cage torn out. Blood is splashing everywhere, pooling around his remaining foot, staining the water and the boat. His left eye blazes a white-hot fire. He fumbles about and grasps for the socket, trying to quell the pain, fresh screams at the blood pouring out. But his eye is gone, as well as half of his face.

Slumped over. Looking back at the tentacled bloody monster in front of him. He gasps, barely able to speak.

"Is it enough? Are we going to heaven?" sputters Bill.

Charon laughs maniacally at this insolence. "You've already wasted your fee to your future on your past. Many times!" Charon sucks the last of Bill's skin off his face.

Through one last eye and an index finger, Bill watched as the taxman in black ferried others to their final destinations. The very last thing Bill could make out against the bones and teeth piled at the back of the boat was another lost soul. A fisherman stepping onto the ship before the world fades to black.

*Few make it off the boat.
The ones who do find destinations flipped.
Best keep a tooth or coin in pocket
in case you need another trip.*

★ ★ ★

Tyler Bly is the student keynote speaker for the NICC Peosta Commencement in Spring 2026. He has generational Iowan roots and considers himself an advocate of free speech and environmentalism. As a former Writing Contest winner, his work was published in *Julien's Journal* in May 2014. He enjoys spending his free time outside— hiking, camping, or golfing with his daughter, family, and friends. He looks forward to his next adventure and his new career.

★ Honorable Mention ★



Against the Stream

Written by **Luke Giegerich**

Stars. A multifarious array strewn across the velvet cloth of night. A dazzling display of luminescence glittered and swarmed the dark borders of the horizon, bathing the surrounding rocks in gentle starglow.

Wikolia gazed deep into the boundless depths, the photoreceptors of her dark eyes translating the heavenly vista into electric signals where her brain would transcribe this image into a core memory.

Though still in middle school, she knew a lot regarding light waves and the process of how brains did phototransduction. Comprehending the underlying science mechanics of stargazing only enriched her wonder for this rare opportunity to visit sacred Kuahiwi. She sat beside the sheer outcropping of rocks that crowned the mountaintop, the open expanse off the narrow trail providing ample room to recline and stretch out her weary legs.

Wikolia had tried to keep count of all the steps she and her father had taken, climbing from the small settlement partway up the mountain. She had crowed victoriously as they reached two thousand, though her energetic enthusiasm waned as the ascent became a slog. Breathing a great sigh of relief, she'd fallen to the earth in a dramatic flair, sarcastically asking her father to pronounce her time of death.

Kaleo rolled his eyes in the way only a besieged parent could, instead suggesting she look up first, to at least get a look before she expired. Wikolia's view of the apex had been obstructed by the sharp incline of the stairs, and she hadn't realized the view awaiting her. Looking up, she exhaled the last of her breath in shock. The starry banks of the sky seemed to surge against the bulwark of surrounding rocks. A brief spell of surreal dizziness engulfed her while she peered into the mystical spectacle.

Her hands scrabbled for secure purchase, as the fear that she might fall upwards and away bubbled up before vanishing. Once the feeling dissipated, she felt only a transcendent childlike joy that compelled her to stand and dance around. Her feelings felt bright enough to mirror the stars above.

"This is a most sacred place, Wili," her father remarked, the first words he'd spoken since they'd reached the summit. Now it was Wikolia who rolled her eyes at the mention of her nickname. Her head made a sharp turn towards Kaleo, but her sharp retort dissipated when she saw the complex mix of reverence and anguish churning his craggy features. Silent and uncertain, Wikolia waited until her father found his voice again.

"Kuahiwi means summit. It was once the roosting place for the goddess Poli'ahu. She alighted here countless seasons ago to quiet the rage of her sister Pele, stilling the mountain and saving our people from certain fiery destruction. We respect this holy place. The only touch of human settlement nearby is the small community we stayed at yesterday. This is not a place for people; only a place for people to give due thanks to Poli'ahu."

Kaleo shifted from one foot to another, as if he was impatiently stretching for a footrace.

"It is tradition to journey here at least once before reaching adulthood. I myself have only been here three other times," he said as he began to pace around the rise like a territorial bird. "You'll never see the skies or stars like this anywhere else in the world. The entire world! We are so blessed to have this woven into our story. To our culture, this IS the summit of the world. It is important we protect this place. Do you understand, Wili?" he asked.

Wikolia thought she understood. "You waited until Nani was about seventeen to bring her. Are we doing this sooner for me because the mainland government wants to build an observatory here?"

Wikolia kicked her scuffed sneakers against the hard ground, staring up at her father. Against the glow of faraway hydrogen-fueled furnaces, he looked built of out stone, as if one with Kuahiwi. His usually calm, often tranquil demeanor seemed set ablaze. She had never seen Kaleo this incensed, even when Wikolia's mother had been

taken off life support because of the tumor eating away at her brain.

He had been able to find resolve in the ancestral stories handed to him by his own father, carrying his wife's untimely death with solid resolve. But just the prospect of the story of this sacred place being rewritten by an outside force had him seething with fervid fire.

"Yes, I felt it was important for you to experience the magic of Kuahiwi before... it becomes too late. I've been discussing it with the elders. The government is making an 'offer' that can't be refused." He clenched a defiant fist in the direction of the mainland, as if he could refute the potential encroachment by will alone.

"They want to build another great telescope that'll let them see further away than ever... What's the point having another machine that can see far away when they're so blind to the things that are right here? Just another divine place to pollute and steal." The fist dropped in defeat. The immolating fires that seemed to fill Kaleo had hollowed him out like spent fuel.

"Life already takes so much from us... I can't lose something else so irreplaceable." He sat down with a hard thump next to Wikolia, sniffing back tears.

Beginning to find the entire situation awkward, Wikolia sloughed off her backpack. Unzipping the bag and nearly diving in to conceal the tinge of red coloring her face, she dug out a bulky cylindrical object. Holding the telescope aloft, she motioned for Kaleo to try it out.

"Do you want to look with this? I was able to install a fifth lens light enough so that it doesn't knock the tripod over." She pulled out the rest of the telescope gear, nimbly setting up the array with precise ease. Even in the diffuse light drifting down from the stars, Kaleo could see the calculated movements that already marked his youngest daughter as a scientist.

Thoughts of Wikolia's older sister Nani dampened the spark of pride, casting long shadows across Kaleo's mind. Both girls were just as brilliant as their mother had been. He scanned the lines of light above, wondering if Nani had gone through with the fellowship application to work with the university that would potentially run the proposed observatory.

He couldn't untangle Nani's intentions of wanting to join the very force that intended to bring harm to their land and culture. Often now, an ember of vexation that was embedded deep in his chest flared to life when he thought of their last conversation— more like a barely suppressed shouting contest.

He could see the hurt etched into Nani's face as he buried her protestations in his own fury.

"They want to staff the facility with native talents! I know it's spiritual ground, but we can't fight something so powerful! It's like holding back the ocean, Dad. We'll just drown. We have—"

He had not let her finish, uncharacteristically storming out of the house. Even though Nani still made time for Kuahiwi, a wall of silence dropped between her and Kaleo.

"Hey, I said, 'Are you ready?'" Bright, sudden light dispersed the reverie Kaleo had been lost in. He squinted back at the small lantern Wikolia held close to his face – another one of her inventions she cobbled together in the tool shed.

The pride and love Kaleo felt for his genius daughters stood tall, much like how the stony fingers of Kuahiwi grasped the sky in anticipation of the goddess Poli'ahu's return. The only thing that could rival that love was the fear tunneling through his heart, seeping doubt that told him he couldn't keep them, or sacred Kuahiwi, safe. Much like how he couldn't keep their mother safe.

Kaleo did his best to smile away the oppressive mood, reminding himself that he brought Wili here as a significant rite of passage. He brushed aside the plastic lantern.

"Have I told you the story of the sea tortoise and the pebble?" he asked the precocious inventor as he swiveled the updated telescope, seeking a specific patch of night through the lens.

"Probably, but you'll tell me again even if I knew it better than you," she quipped.

"Ahem. I sure am... Anyways, look here." Kaleo moved aside and indicated Wikolia to peer into the eyepiece. "Do you see that group of stars, right under that really bright one?"

Wikolia could, even without the telescope.

"Remember Honu's persistence, Wili. Remember how he endures, and doesn't falter in the face of a difficult trial. Stay against the stream. We must resist, and have the strength to catch that pebble."

"That is Honu, the great green sea turtle. As a young turtle, he met and courted his love. Wanting to give her a most exceptionally unique and precious gift, he scoured the oceans for many seasons, until he came upon a pristine, glowing pebble lodged deep in the shell of a giant clam. Honu, filled with determination, put all his effort into dislodging the white stone, but to no avail. The pebble would not budge.

"The clam found the spectacle of Honu amusing and began to laugh. The clam's mirth shifted its grip upon the pebble enough where a final push by Honu sent it spinning away into the deep ocean currents..."

Kaleo intoned, his storytelling cadence sweeping Wikolia along with the fantastical tale. She could envision Honu desperately pursuing the pebble while tracing the glittering constellation through her telescope.

“So resolute to prove his love to his mate, he continues to pursue the errant pebble across the sea, casting a net of stars across the night sky,” Kaleo said, finishing the story in a puff of visible breath. Aware of the dropping temperature, they took a few more moments to admire the stars before repacking the telescope.

As they crossed the expansive space between the rocky crown of Kuahiwi and the top of the narrow trail, Kaleo pointed above. “Remember Honu’s persistence, Wili. Remember how he endures, and doesn’t falter in the face of a difficult trial. Stay against the stream. We must resist, and have the strength to catch that pebble.”

Wikolia paused at the first rough-hewn steps of the path, with her custom lantern held between her hands. The blazing spots of lucent fire magnetically drew her gaze up. The message Kaleo was imparting to her came through crystalline clear: she needed to resist against the current. Whether that was a current wrought of change, or imperial control, she understood the message Kaleo wanted to impart. The ability and desire to protect the majesty of this mountain. She held her lantern up to the night in supplication, a star closer than the others.



Wikolia held the experiences of that night close to her heart. Many years passed until the next time she scaled Kuahiwi. Similar to that night, she again held the lantern in her hands; this time the battered plastic case held the potential to push against the stream.

The starry night with her father felt like lightyears away. Now only one star illuminated the charged chaos of the scene before her. Shouting protestors were being shoved back as the high chain link gates swung open, permitting only the construction truck to enter. Wikolia thumbed the lantern switch; she’d been frozen in place for over an hour, trapped in executive dysfunction. If she toggled the activator, the bomb would detonate. They could take back Kuahiwi. She hoped.



The placid night of stars of so long ago felt nearly effaced from Wikolia’s memory. Where there had been solid stone and her father’s stories among the distant pins of star shine was now a bubbling reaction of oppressive summer sun, the stench of machine exhaust, and curse words that lingered on the air long after being uttered.

She stood apart from the seething scene of human activity; she stood partially concealed at the end of a short row of porta potties, tucked away underneath a mountainous spur of rock. Flies danced a lazy circle about her head as she internally teetered back and forth on whether to detonate the device.

The years had quickly passed since her first pilgrimage to the summit; just as quickly had the mainland government’s compassionate consideration for their cultural holy place waned. The protest had nearly degraded to outright fistfights between the zealous gathering of natives led by Kaleo and the security detail denying them access to Kuahiwi’s upper reaches.

She could see the summit piercing the washed-out blue sky above, like a giant crown intentionally left to mark a place of majestic grandeur.

There, across the dusty pavement, her father raised a recalcitrant fist against the heavy oppression smothering his ignited action. Wikolia was displaced in time, remembering the faltering fist Kaleo had been unable to hold up against the seemingly far away threat. Now he fought against the current like never before, emboldened by the support surrounding him.

The crowd shouted with one voice, pushing against the line of uniformed people standing vigilant before the barrier. Even this far up the mountain path, the summer heat shimmered off the gleaming stone about them, as if the Goddess Pele herself simmered with volcanic fury.

The remnants of the small settlement partway up the mountain had been disassembled, all the inhabitants evacuated along with their possessions and a tidy little piece of paper that promised ample reparations in this unfortunate, though necessary outcome.

There, across the dusty pavement, her father raised a recalcitrant fist against the heavy oppression smothering his ignited action.

Many of the displaced natives immediately gathered to Kaleo’s banner of war. Construction was underway where the village had stood. However, even from here, Wikolia spied a crane being erected further up the ancient pathway. As the worksite grew, so did the crushing weight of their dwindling hopes.

Their island was featured on major news sites with weekly updates now; the entire world had begun to take a keen interest in the aggressive dance between natives and government workers. Between her father desperately trying to cling to their culture’s eroding ideals and Nani’s acceptance as a Support Astronomer in the emerging observatory, Wikolia felt trapped at the very core of the conflict. She wondered if Nani was looking down at her family from an air-conditioned workroom, on the other side of the war.

She loved her sister fiercely, though Wikolia couldn’t comprehend how she’d been able to cast aside the values instilled into them by Kaleo. Because of that assumed betrayal, she felt the responsibility she inherited from their father as a keen blade driving deep between her shoulder blades, ready to stab her heart. She wanted to save her homeland, but part of her yearned to be on the other side too.

As much as she sympathized with her father, she yearned for a world of progressive science and the chance to be involved in the mechanism pushing it forward. As strained as the tensions had become in their family, she was grateful that her father and Nani were at least on speaking terms again, if only on the most superficial matters.

Wikolia was tied to the roots of their island; her bones were made of the same clay, had been anointed by the same starlight, kissed by the same ocean waves, held the stories of their gods in a heart fashioned just the same as all her ancestors.

She couldn't find that balance between passion and reason, the horizon line blending sea and sky. An irrepressible feeling of yearning blossomed within her chest. Like a nuclear fission born from the depths of a star, the energy pushed through her. Energy galvanized her to move, her finger hovering over the toggle switch. She could end it—end the building now. Her feet took big strides as she abandoned her staked out shelter, pulled towards the growing monolith of uncaring 21st century industry rising beyond the barrier.

Sure, the protesters were a rowdy bunch that drew the eye of the media and countless supporters around the globe. However, some work could only be done discreetly. Her father was too brazen, too much of a stalwart defender to think of proper subterfuge. Unlike him, a certain capable engineer could slip through the worksite in the dark by way of mountain trails only locals would be aware of. This particular young woman was of slight build, and had no difficulty squeezing under a gap in the fence, affixing a well-disguised explosive on just the right support pillar of the developing communications infrastructure (she'd had a stroke of serendipitous luck finding a copy of the site blueprints while staying with Nani a few weeks back).

She had never built a bomb before, but the internet could teach you how to do anything if you were persistent enough.

Persistent...like the sea turtle.

She had to stay defiant. This could save Kuahiwi, her father, their very culture. The discharge would be VERY loud, though it should only damage the building. She'd been present at enough protests to roughly know the construction crew's schedule. She could do this. If nothing else, halt their progress for a few months. Maybe more support would rally around her father and the other protectors. They could overturn the tide.

What if somebody gets hurt?

It should be easy to hide her involvement, but what if her actions went viral? She could be the face of the resistance.

What if they find out and you're arrested?

Wikolia realized that outcome was possible...but didn't all

freedom fighting come with an inherited risk?

What if Nani is hurt?

There's no way that should happen. She didn't work in communications. She'd be fine. This was necessary. The turtle never gave up chasing his pebble. Her father never gave up, and she wouldn't either. Even if Nani had. She wasn't a bad guy, but was taking a paycheck from them. Maybe she would even understand. Wikolia squashed the gnawing doubts holding her.

I'm sorry, Nani! I'm trying my best, father! A warrior raising a spear to strike down the heavens, she pointed the toy lantern up to the sky, just like when she'd pointed her telescope up beyond Kuahiwi's spire.

Against the stream!

Wikolia flipped the switch... and waited.

And continued to wait.

And became slightly puzzled and had to let go the breath she'd locked up in her chest. Pulling the lantern close for inspection, she started to curse the old circuits of her invention, when a light touch on her shoulder startled her. Her brain sputtered sparks of perplexment for a moment, unable to comprehend Nani's sudden appearance, her subtle features blending annoyance and amusement, and the fistful of wires she held out to Wikolia.

"Got time to talk, kaikaina (sis)?"



"**You're so lucky** Jones realized it was you in the security footage and let me know asap... Wili, why?!" Nani paced around a desk crammed into the only open corner of a very compact office. Wikolia gazed at the photos taped to a corkboard hanging slightly askew on the wall. The photos were interlapped; one of Wikolia, Nani, and their father laughing as their old family dog Chops leaned in for the shot. Another of Wikolia painting a dusky sunset scene on the back deck, studiously bent over the canvas. She'd forgotten about her artistic craze during high school.

One of Nani and her partner. Wikolia was surprised to see an aerial photo of Kuahiwi, and a very faded and bent photo of their mother smiling as she plucked clothes from a clothesline. Wikolia assumed it was taken before she was born. She couldn't recall such a young and carefree version of her mom in her own collective memory. Nani slapped the top of the desk, startling Wikolia.

"Yo! Did you leave orbit again, Wili? What are we doing? You know you could have been prosecuted as a terrorist! Man, the mainland is wild about putting away anyone they deem radical, and this was the most radical idea I've ever seen in person. How was this suppose to help?" Nani chided, her curly hair bounced around like furious snakes writhing about Medusa's head.

Wikolia nearly gulped at the sudden imagery, though she refused to be intimidated. "It would have helped more than you have lately! You're so brilliant; you could have gone anywhere in the world, worked any fellowship. Why come back here as a tool to be used by the mainland government!?! I know you and Dad do your best to avoid talking about this stuff, but it's going to be impossible to keep pretending. Didn't he tell you about the turtle too? Why didn't you stay persistent?" Wikolia had to fight back a sob; even at 22 she still felt like a child when confronting her older sister.

Nani halted her mechanized pacing, needing only to reach over the desk to rifle through the dented filing cabinet next to Wikolia. Instead of verbally responding, she tossed several printed diagrams onto the desk. Wikolia saw meticulously drafted designs for a telescope – much bigger than any she'd built herself. Nonplused, she filtered through the papers, the idea of a new observatory being built on the western mountain ranges. Far away from Kuahiwi. Shocked, she looked to Nani for direction.

"Yes. You're so smart, you figured it out instantly. A few others and I have been able to calculate a better site for the observatory. This is a secret project; the execs don't know about it yet. We plan to let them know before too much of the launching platform here is built... The only thing is, I need a certain somebody to help me with the architectural design. Like maybe my talented kid sister if she's done being angry with me?" Nani mock-pouted.

It took Wikolia a moment to recover from disbelief. "Why haven't you told Dad?" she asked.

Nani resumed her pacing circuit, smiling. "I didn't know if we could make this happen. I don't want to say this was

my only intention, why I pursued working here, but... persist against the stream, right?"

Wikolia reciprocated the smile.

Nani's face reverted to her usual serious demeanor. "I mean, of course I wanted to tell him. But he's completely forbidden the topic. I understand, though. Our fights used to be really bad." Nani crossed her arms, distractedly rubbing her right hand up and down her left triceps. "But Dad is... well, Dad. We can let him know— or maybe you can, since he'll talk to you about this. But regardless, will you help, Wili?!"

Almost scrunching up the prints in barely-repressed excitement, Wikolia looked up at her sister, her eyes beaming the same radiance reflected from the stars atop Kuahiwi all those years ago. For just a moment, Nani's smiling face radiated sunshine just like their mother's once did.

"Yes."

★ ★ ★

Luke Giegerich is enrolled in the Associate of Arts program at NICC and will graduate in May 2026. Luke is a lifelong practitioner of artistic inquiries, spending countless hours honing daydream sessions into imaginative pieces. Employed at Carnegie-Stout Public Library in Dubuque, he works diligently to defend literacy, along with the other humanities.

Spring 2026

6th annual district-wide **Larry Kruse Memorial Writing Contest**

Writing Contest Judges

The judging panel for this year's Writing Contest consisted of the following individuals from the Learning Center, Testing Center, and Libraries on both campuses. Each judge read all 29 entries and voted for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd-place winners in each category. All judges' votes were then compiled to choose the final winners. Thanks to our judges for being thoughtful readers!

Beck Bradley, Peosta Testing Center

Germaine Kuhn, Calmar Library

Jayne Schuster, Peosta Learning Center

Jonathan Banse, Peosta Library

Paul Kimball, Peosta Learning Center

Rose Malinowski, Peosta Learning Center

Tom Parnow, Peosta Learning Center

Victor Lieberman, NICC Libraries

Technical Assistance

Denise English, Dept. of Instructional Innovation & Design

Marzieh Shahrivar, Central Printing

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