

Essay

1st Place

Witness

by *Mary Jane Westerhausen*

I've always known I wanted to be a mother. From the time I was a little girl I was always mothering some orphan. Kittens, calves, cottontails, a lamb, chicks, ducklings and even some tadpoles were my first children. But wanting to become a Grandmother? I wasn't so sure. Maybe in a few years, when I was an old lady, but for now I was much too young. I had married at twenty and had my first child at twenty-three. That child, Daine, still a baby herself at twenty-two was expecting her first baby. Despite my warning of once you have children, they're yours for life, Daine had become pregnant on her honeymoon.

Six months after the marriage ceremony, the day after Christmas, Daine's husband Randy, a National Guard member, left for training on the first leg of his journey to Iraq. Not long afterward, Daine appeared on our doorstep. She had been deliberately taking my sermon on "children are for life" to mean that I was still responsible for her, despite her married status. She was often at our home, and usually looking for a meal. But this time she was looking for more than crab fettuccini.

"Will you be my birthing coach?" she asked. "My best friend Angie is going to be in the delivery room videotaping the birth to send to Randy. I need *you* to be there to take Randy's place."

"I don't know," I said, stalling. "I have a lot of experience delivering babies, but unfortunately they were calves, not my potential grandchild."

"There'll be a doctor there," Daine said rolling her eyes, "all you have to do is get me through it."

I wasn't so sure I wanted to be there, to see my child going through the ache of childbirth. I hadn't been drugged through the birth of my three children and knew something about the pain involved. Daine wanted her birthing experience to be as natural as possible. There wasn't going to be a spinal block or if she had anything to say about it, a C-section.

The months passed by. Daine is a tiny thing. And it soon became obvious that the baby she was carrying wasn't. To top it off, she looked like she was twelve years old, with a beach ball shoved under her top. People would stop and say sympathetically, "How are you doing, really?" and pat Daine's stomach. She had all she could do to answer politely after she had answered the same question so many times. By this time Daine was tired of sympathy, tired of being the poor pregnant woman with her husband off at war, tired of being pregnant. "Don't touch me," she wanted to snap. Or as an alternative answer, "My boobs are swollen too, do you want to feel them?"

So there I was in the delivery room on April 15th, Daine's due date. I was there when Daine changed her mind and decided

not to have a baby after all. I was there when the doctor said, “Either the baby comes out on the next push, or we’re going down to surgery.” It was me who explained to Daine what that meant. But most of all I was there to hear his borning cry when Cullen Roy Flieth entered the world.

I’ve heard that naming something gives you ownership. I didn’t get to name the baby, but witnessing the birth of my first grandchild gave me a bond with Cully that I think will last forever. I was his second parent while we waited for Daddy to return home. “Nanny” was one of his first words, and every time I would stop to see him, he’d cry when I had to leave.

As his dad once again has left for training in preparation to return to Iraq, three-year-old Cully appears to have accepted his absence for now. “Nana stay here?” Cully asks, afraid I might be going to Iraq too.

“Yeah, Cully. Nana will stay. That’s what Grandmas do.”

2nd Place

An Unanswered Question

by *Brooke Wendlicke*

Baby Brooke’s funeral was the first funeral I had ever been to, but even so, I didn’t really attend the service. The Sunday school room of our church never seemed so gloomy as it did that cloudy March day ten years ago, when I sat within its four walls, trying my hardest to keep three-year-old Maggie distracted. We sat on the hard carpet in the center of the floor as I watched her scribbling with a crayon in one of the coloring books. Several child sized desks stood against the grey wall. One narrow

basement window showed the cloudy sky outside. Even though I could just make out the pastors voice projecting to the congregation upstairs, I tried to block him out so I wouldn’t give away my true emotions to young Maggie. Maggie’s mother, Jan, had asked me to take Maggie to one of the rooms and play with her, while she and everyone else attended the funeral service upstairs. Over and over, Maggie would ask me the same question in her innocent child voice, “Where Brooke go?” This question haunted my memory of the events from a week prior, and it took everything within me to keep my composure as I shifted a puzzle in front of Maggie, to distract her from an answer I couldn’t yet find.

Jan had been our next door neighbor and long time family friend for as long as I can remember. Jan had been there when my parents had lost my older sister, Ashley, to crib death several months after her birth. It’s only because of Ashley’s death that I am here today, since my parents had planned to only raise three children. Eventually Jan got married and gave birth to two girls, one of which she had named after me shortly before they left for Japan. When I was about eight years old, her husband was transferred to a base in Okinawa. My family and I often called to catch up with Jan and the girls, Brooke, who was about three months, and three-year-old Maggie. They had been settled in for a little over month when my parents received a call from her one morning, a call I only heard about after the most distressing experience.

The morning of the call, I sat at my desk inside my third grade classroom, taking the state CTBS test. I heard a knock on the door and looked up to see my dad walking in and over to Miss Seibel. He said something under his breath and then looked over at me. Miss Seibel nodded her head in agreement as he turned and motioned me to

follow him. He led me down the hall towards the front doors leading outside; all the while he remained quiet.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“We’ll talk about it when we get home,” he answered as he pushed the door of the school open for me. I first thought I had done something wrong, and couldn’t figure out why he would take me out of class if I was in trouble.

We stepped outside into a sunny, but cold, March day. My older sister, Casie, already waiting for us by the truck, opened the door as I approached. I gave her a questioning look as I hopped in, but she only shrugged her shoulders. She had no idea what was going on either. We drove the few blocks to my house in silence.

At the house, we followed Dad inside; he waved us to sit on the couch in the living room. My sister and I sat on our large brown sofa with my Dad directly across from us on the matching love seat. He took one look at us and was quiet for several moments, eventually putting his hands to his face, covering it completely.

I looked from him to my sister, Casie, and back to him. My heart raced wondering what could possibly be so important that we had to be taken out of class. I racked my brain for a possible reason for this confrontation. Several minutes went by, but he remained noiseless as the second hand on the clock produced thundering ticks through the silence. Casie and I waited anxiously, watching him every minute, waiting for him to reappear from behind his hands.

He finally uncovered his face and looked at us. At that moment, I realized that whatever he was about to say would change a part of me forever. His face, deep red in color and with his lips pressed tightly together, looked like it would combust if he didn’t open his mouth. I looked deep into his eyes trying to foresee what he was about to

tell us, but couldn’t penetrate his tears. I had never seen my dad cry before, and it made a lump form in my throat, which I couldn’t swallow. Time seemed to stand still as my sister and I sat looking at him.

Finally, after another long pause, he took a deep breath and choked out, “Jan’s baby, Brooke, died in her sleep this morning.”

My heart skipped a beat. I sat there stunned. “What?” I asked, as if I hadn’t heard, though I heard every word clearly. I gazed back up at my dad and watched as a tear rolled silently down his cheek. I didn’t even realize tears were streaming down my face until my sister came and put her arm around me.

Finally my dad spoke again. “I just don’t understand how God can just take innocent little babies from us,” he said through his tears. It felt completely surreal. I kept hoping I would wake up back in my third grade classroom, with the test in front of me and a pencil in my hand. However, nothing changed. It took a long while for me to settle down enough so I could return to school again.

My mom would often call Jan at night to help her deal with the loss. I would hear her sobbing in the next room as they shared stories of their lost baby girls. Finally, Jan and her family made it back to North Dakota for the funeral, and Jan asked me if I would watch over Maggie during the funeral. When she asked I had been more than willing to do this favor for her.

Now, though, sitting in that Sunday school room, avoiding Maggie’s haunting question, I began to wonder if I had made the right choice to babysit her instead of attending the funeral upstairs. I was trying recklessly to come up with something to answer her question, instead of just distracting her. At this moment, I began to realize the traumatic experience my very own parents had gone through before I was

born. Just as I was dealing with Maggie, they had had two children to care and be strong for when Ashley died. As I continued comparing these two events, I began to feel a greater honor to be sitting there with Maggie, as well as a greater respect and understanding of parents' strength and care for me and my siblings.

The Meaning of Success

by *Candace Kraft*

Boxes of electronic equipment and discarded college textbooks lay strewn about Brian Dale Kraft's workshop, which doubles as his living room at his trailer house in Jamestown, ND. A little under six feet tall with a thin frame, my dad's not the tallest man in the world. Tousled, tan hair covers his head, while large glasses frame brown eyes. When he cooks up a plan or idea, mischievousness spreads across his face. That's probably why close friends call him Krafty.

To my Dad, being crafty isn't enough. Surprisingly, I found out during the interview for this essay that he didn't view himself as a successful person. He's worked harder all his life than any guy I know and has always surpassed the expectations required of the job. Selflessness and perseverance pervade every area of Dad's life and, he's taught himself incredibly difficult, college-level subjects. To top it off, he and his wife, Jackie, have an enviable marriage. Dad perceives only his failed goals and disappointing business ventures.

The first reason he sees himself as a letdown has to do with a failed life goal. When I asked what his goal is, Dad replied, "It's to have a million dollars by the time I'm fifty years old." He wanted to be a millionaire by the time he was thirty and also forty, but that didn't happen. Because

he's not rolling in greenbacks, Dad views his life as relatively unsuccessful.

His many fruitless business endeavors are the second reason he views himself as a failure. Taking a break from the nine-to-five form of occupations, my Dad devoted his time to studying thriving, affluent people like Donald Trump, Milton Hershey, and J.P. Morgan. He tried a service business doing odd jobs and also selling auto parts out from under our trailer house. None of those ideas worked out, but he never gave up his dream of a profitable business venture.

The first reason I view Dad as a success is because of his self-education. My father quests for knowledge on his time off from trucking for Holland Enterprises. He brings trigonometry and electrical math books with him on the road, and studies from them when he's stopped for the night. Many of his days and nights have been spent fixing electronics, which he learned from aging textbooks found in second-hand shops and antique stores.

Another thing that attests to Dad's successful life is his happy marriage. His wife, Jackie, chooses to drive in the truck with him to keep him company and help him unload the goods. They use their spare time to look for treasures with their metal detector. Jackie digs while Dad searches. Laughter and love flow from them when they are together.

In my eyes, my dad's dedication to working hard makes him a successful person. When I was a baby, he toiled at three different places: Red Lobster, Hector International Airport, and cleaning carpets with his brother, Dan. Then, when our family moved to Jamestown, Dad got employed at Northstar Body Shop. One memory displaying his dedication to top-quality work reiterates this point.

Once, around Christmas time, Dad allowed my sister, Heidi, and me to go with

him to Northstar to help him work. He handed us both white, cloth masks to put over our mouths after showing us how to tape the car up. Total perfection Dad expected from us. Standing aside, I observed him meticulously painting. I didn't realize until that moment, how much care and concern he put into his work. My heart swelled with pride that my Dad was such a hard worker, as the three of us searched for smears and bubbles. No flaws were located, just as I thought.

Because he sacrifices so much for his family is another reason why he's a success. Turning down an opportunity to attend college to be a diesel mechanic in his early 20s, Dad chose instead to stay in the workforce. "I had a family to raise," he muses. "I didn't think I could go to school and take care of a family at the same time."

Also, when I was about six years old, Dad worked at the West Fargo slaughter house as a meat cutter. He said it was one of the worst jobs he's ever had, but it paid pretty well. "It was miserable smelling death all day, but I did it to keep food on the table for you kids," my dad muses.

The final reason why I believe Dad is a success is because he's one of the most driven people I know. Even though many of his money-making ideas have failed, he never gives up trying. Knowing money doesn't fall out the sky, he labors every day to make his business aspirations a reality. Dad inspires me to keep striving for my goals in the face of failure. Matter-of-factly he states, "There's absolutely nothing I can't do. If I think I can't, then I have to think up another plan to make it happen."

Once again he has a new strategy. Dad hopes to start a route with his arcade games and jukeboxes, and plans to purchase some vending machines, too. Recently, Dad bought a large, moving truck to transport his games around, and this time he's going to get a business license.

Brian Kraft has built a life for himself and his family with good, old-fashioned hard work and perseverance. Jackie sees Dad successful with his family, friends, and career, and wishes he would take more time to appreciate the happiness that comes from that.

Being a perfectionist, he sees nothing wrong with constantly striving for something better. Success abounds in all areas of his life, yet he fails to perceive it because of his focus on obtaining financial wealth.

Last year I bought him a very plain, ugly plaque at a thrift store that quotes Charles Spurgeon. The line states, "Happiness is not how much you have, but how much you enjoy." It hangs in the same room where he works on his magnum opus, an antique Rockola jukebox. A playful smile extends across his stubbly face, and his eyes twinkle with the confidence of an accomplished man.

Mother's Day Mishaps

by *Shea Carpenter*

Ridiculously early on the dawn of Mother's Day last year my life came crashing down, quite literally, around me. It had been a hot day in the windy desert town of Stagecoach, Nevada—hot enough that the wind itself seemed to burn the flesh, but the night, as cold as the day was hot, was colder than any other night I would ever feel.

I left Amanda's house at about four in the morning, tired from that day's work in the hot sun, the late night expedition to the haunted house with my friends, and other events that developed during the evening. Amanda finished warning me not to fall asleep as I fired up my jeep and zigzagged down the long, deserted road to my house.

Five minutes later, I was dozing off and dreaming of the day's events.

Four hours earlier, I had just gotten off from work from the midnight shift at the only grocery store in town. Amanda and I drove to get a bite to eat at a fast food restaurant. Then we came back to buy a few items from the 24-hour store. Amanda found a friend of hers named Stephanie in the parking lot. The three of us talked in the parking lot until another friend of mine named Bon showed up. We were debating about what we should do at one in the morning when a police officer pulled up to check our IDs for being out past curfew. We decided to leave the lot and check out an old haunted house in the middle of the desert.

I awoke briefly, from the headlights of cars driving by. I was passing the gas station on my way down the highway. I tried to concentrate harder on the road, but wasn't overly concerned about falling asleep because I had been doing it for a few days. It was a few moments before going back into the unconscious a couple of minutes later.

Bon, the friend from the parking lot, drove down the bumpy, dusty, unpaved road. We arrived at the small, rundown, crumbling shack in Stagecoach. We went over to the cloudy glass windows, hearing voices or a radio. Chills swamped our bodies and we left for home. Mother's Day was soon and we needed to get home.

A bump aroused me and I rolled down the window to stop my constant drifting off to dreams. The cold air pricked the left half of my face with a stinging numbness. I decided that the freezing wind outweighed me being alert. I rolled up the window and within seconds I was asleep again.

Deciding to call it a night, Bon and Stephanie left while I took Amanda back to her house. 2:30 flashed on my cell phone- I was celebrating Mother's Day in a few hours. Amanda and I went back to her

house, and we chose to hang out for a while before I left. After talking and getting to know each other better, I convinced her I needed to get home.

The sleep guard strip on the right shoulder of the highway abruptly brought me back into reality as I left the road at 65 mph and headed for a snow reflector pole. Thinking quickly of what my parents would do if I damaged my car, I swerved to miss the pole. I wasn't quite fast enough and scraped the back half of my jeep on the pole. My jeep rotated sideways, skidded up a bank, flipped up on its nose, and spun through a gate on the side of the highway. The whole experience seemed like a dream. It wasn't really me flipping through the air eyes closed and arms around my head... it couldn't be. When the jeep finished its gymnast routine, the view in front of me was that of shiny, sharp objects scattered over brown mass. The sound of a blinker rang softly in the back of my mind. Luckily, I saw my phone on the sun roof. I grabbed it to call for help.

"911, what's the emergency?" said a slightly calming woman's voice.

"I, umm, flipped my car and crashed." I said in a shaky, yet calm, voice.

"Are you okay? Are you in the car and can you get out of it?" she asked me.

"I'm fine, I think. Let me try to get out." I replied more confident and in control of the situation. I undid my seatbelt, forgetting I was upside down, and barely caught myself with my feet on the roof of my car, causing crunching and crackling noises from the glass. The maze I traversed to climb out the rear side window seemed to taunt me about what I had done to my car. "I'm out of the car," I said, realizing the emergency woman had been talking the whole time and I had zoned out.

"Are you alright? Where are you? Tell me where you are!" She said with a sharp tone of urgency.

“I’m... between Smith’s... and... the... hill into Stagecoach,” I said vaguely. I really wanted to say something along the lines of “in the middle of f*****g nowhere.” Time was at a standstill and moving at light speed at the same time.

I heard ambulance sirens and I looked at my phone to check the time. It was 4:30 a.m. The cold gripped me tight. I tasted dry blood on my lip from the small cut tucked underneath my upper lip. I answered questions of the young paramedics and the seasoned police officer while I entered the pale ambulance for a checkup. They were astonished and mystified I was alive let alone that I only had a scratch across my chest. I sulked in the cold, steel-plated, makeshift seat of the mobile hospital, thinking to myself about how I wish I was this awake when I was driving. I even wished had I died in the accident to avoid my step dad’s judgment.

I heard the policeman call my step dad, Jim, to come and get me. Earlier that night, the same officer had talked to my friends and me outside of Smith’s. He tried to cheer me up a bit. After questioning me about telling me to go home earlier, he said, “I have bad news son”—in return, he received a dry laugh from me since I didn’t think the night could be much worse—“we were looking through your car for your wallet and we discovered that your condoms didn’t make it.” I laughed again and started to feel a bit relieved about the whole situation.

That feeling of warmth left when I looked through the frost lined window at my flipped car as the sun rose slightly from behind the mountain. I wished again that I would have died rather than face my parents. I felt alone with my emotions—anger, melancholy, hatred, embarrassment—and dreaded my step dad’s arrival, feared disapproval of my family, and felt ashamed for being irresponsible.

My step dad showed up around 5:00 a.m. while the sun started to rise. He looked at me with his piercing green eyes, looked at the mangled car, searched for my timid face again, and grinned a bit. I thought to myself, why did he grin, wasn’t he going to yell and scream and tell me how stupid or irresponsible I am?

He asked, “What happened?” pointing a dry and hardened finger towards the jeep.

“Fell asleep and flipped it over the mound,” I stated plainly.

“I see that. I’m glad I didn’t let your Mom come see this. She would’ve been a mess.”

“I know I’m sorry... for everything.”

“We’ll talk ‘bout this later. Let’s get back home and get ready for the trip to Grandma’s house.”

He helped me with as much of the police report stuff as he could, and finally, grabbing my backpack and handing it to me, asked if I was ok. He cared more about me and my personal safety than how bad I screwed up. I had wished to be dead to avoid his wrath. I realized that no matter how bad things seem, life, family and friends are great gifts and should be cherished. I pondered the astonishing fact that my only injury was a bruise, half of an inch thick, which stained my chest as if to say I got off with a warning. Jim, and I hopped into his steel-blue, diesel pickup and drove past the wreckage towards the rising sun. I now saw a different world after comprehending what had happened in these last few hours. My bitterness at myself would be a problem in the upcoming months; however, life isn’t just precious for me, but my family and friends too. It was selfish of me to want death to escape my problems. It is an irrational thought which I will not make again.

A Final Goodbye

by *Alicia Rohr*

Spring Break.

These are two words every college student likes to hear. Two reasons are because it is a time away from classes and all the teachers that like to keep adding to the pile called homework. Whether Spring Break be the time for doing absolutely nothing, or for basting in the sun of a coastal state, mine never came close to that, but this year would probably be one that is definitely most memorable.

I started out Spring Break week by working a couple of hours and then leaving for Minneapolis/St. Paul to do a Cultural Diversity Practicum. Driving and not being able to sleep in has already consumed my body within only three days. I enjoyed it however. I realized I would like to teach in a larger school and I was sad I had to leave. While heading back to Valley City, I got a phone call which said I was supposed to call my mom to see what she had to say about Grandma and that she was back in the hospital. In a panic, I called considering my loved one has been sick now for a while. I will admit that I was speeding a little in the state fleet vehicle. I wanted to get back home. My heart was racing and this is where it all began.

Making my mind up about the decision to go farther yet in the same day and drive to Hettinger, ND, I did not care one bit about driving farther. I just wanted to see my grandma. When I arrived in Valley City, I was told to stay there for the night due to the fact that roads were bad. At this point, I was sick of icy roads and cars in the ditches. So early the next day, I woke my fiancé up and we left for Hettinger. My cousin called me as I was halfway to Bismarck and said that I should be prepared to stop in Richardton because there was a chance that Hettinger was going to life flight

Grandma to Bismarck, although I should keep on driving. Sure enough, we got to Richardton and had to turn around. We, along with other various family members, beat Grandma to the hospital, and this was quite a wait. Then she came onto the floor to head through the ICU doors and I was already getting scared. She was ghostly pale and really didn't comprehend what was going on because of all the pain medication, yet looking around to see what was going on. Not once did I think about what was yet to come.

The nurses said it would be about a half an hour before we could start going in to see her. TV, magazines, and talking amongst others were the only ways to pass the time. When we heard it would be yet a little longer, some of us went to the floral shop down the street. An angel with a health prayer and a "Get Well Soon" balloon with Grandma's favorite, a birdhouse, were items we found to cheer her up. We purchased these items with high hopes that she was going to be ok and that she just needed a little help breathing, only to get the phone call on a cell as the last item is being paid for that we need to get there immediately because she was getting worse by the second. Out the door we ran ignoring the street signs that say "Don't Walk." I've never run so fast in my life, and in flats might I add. We got back to the hospital to find out she couldn't breathe at all and was hooked up to machines. Finally, we were preparing to go see her, along with hearing from an uncle, "these machines are keeping her alive right now."

My heart is racing even more and after about a minute, my body falls and my eyes are like waterfalls. My grandma, one of my parents, is slipping on me. I was in a nightmare.

Then my turn came. It was time to go see her. Something that I didn't know, it was the last time. I prepared myself seeing

how other family members reacted after coming out of the doors. I wanted to be strong so I could see her and talk to her. Entering the room gave me a feeling like my heart dropped into my stomach. Machines were all over the place and a tube was down her throat, the only way that she was able to breathe. I wanted to kiss her on her forehead but to my disadvantage, I was too short. I kissed my hand and then laid my hand on her forehead. Her eyebrows rose every now and then, and showed us signs that she knew we were there. Leaving the room my feet and legs felt as if they weren't even there. I was floating.

A couple of hours passed and the entire family showed up, then Pizza Hut was a destination point for us. Food was needed and it was close by since the cafeteria was no longer open. A great family friend, also a well-know priest showed up. He was there with us and it was a nice feeling while eating. He and Grandpa left as soon as they were done eating to head back up to Grandma's room so he could say a prayer. The rest of us left and headed back to say the rosary. About halfway through our family prayer, one of my aunts came rushing out to say that they had lost Grandma for a moment and then she came back.

Grandma was not ready to leave. She was going to fight.

Time was passing. I was telling myself that whatever is going to happen will be for a reason and I just wanted that thing to happen. I wanted to snap out of the nightmare.

The night doctor came and staff worked on her as they lost her a second time. Unbelievable. Family members were starting to go back just to be there. We wanted to pray. We wanted to hold each other.

X-rays were saying that there had been a tumor there for a while now, along with emphysema and problems with the

lungs. The doctor was telling us that if they gave her oxygen, her blood pressure would get messed up and if they had gotten her blood pressure at a decent level, she wouldn't get the oxygen she needed. They couldn't win, yet the medical staff was not giving up and they were doing everything possible. Finally we were all called back. There was nothing left to do and her brain wavelength was no longer there. My nightmare grew stronger as the whole family crowded into her little ICU room. 30 of us went in there standing by one another, crying like we have never cried before, and holding onto Grandma. The moment came and they shut the machines off.

She was gone.

I wasn't waking up.

My mind was racing back to Christmas how I was told to savor the moment.

"This could be Grandma's last," my mom and another one my aunts told us.

I started thinking of the very last time I saw her. I went down with my mom a few days before Valentine's Day. When I hugged her then, I was scared to even touch her. I thought she was going to break. She had lost so much weight. I was realizing the things that were said at Christmas and even though the moment had been tough, I hugged her. I kissed her on her cheek like she always did to me. I smelt that smell of hers, taking in the moment. She made sure I wasn't going to make it another two months until a saw her again and that was an order. We ate with my grandparents that day and it was just a nice feeling to be there. I didn't want it to end. As the day went on, and our time was nearing the end, and Grandma was looking tired. It wasn't the tired that one sees in someone when they are ready for bed either. Her body had had enough even then.

I still can't sleep at night. I still see all those machines hooked up to her, helping

her fight for her life. My nightmares hit me hard.

As more time goes on however, I am hit with memories. The whole family called her “Bakka” because I could never say “Grandma” as a child. I had a special bond with her, and with my Grandpa still to this day. I spent every summer with them and my eldest cousin until I had to stay at home and get a job. We did many things as a family and had many family talks. Most of my homesick feeling is because I want to be back with my grandparents in their house and not at my home where I graduated high school. With no father figure in my life, my grandparents helped raise me, thus making the situation even harder.

I sometimes think that she is still at home. She is sitting at home watching TV, making homemade knoephla, or getting ready to crochet yet another item to win a blue ribbon at the state fair. I still get impatient to sit down and play a card game with her.

I was told I am the grandchild that looks most like her and it makes me feel good inside. I only hope that someday I can cook as good as her and be a strong backbone for my family the way that she was. She was an incredible lady who passed so soon at the age of 63. Her story ended so soon and I miss her.

Mexico’s Misfortune

by *Ashley Heinz*

I remember rising out of my hammock early that morning in the beginning of June. Merida, Mexico’s morning sun poured in through the open window onto my feet. I stretched, made my way over to the window and with amazement, gazed outside. Bicycle horns, salesman voices, and people driving to work

– what a friendly, together culture. Startled by the clanking dishes in the kitchen and my host family’s breakfast chatter, I started for the dining room. About halfway through the hallway, I stopped, closed my eyes, and experienced. I took a deep breath and could almost taste the fried eggs and onions, fresh fruit, and toast. Not hearing a single word of English, it suddenly hit me that I was living in a foreign country. Nevertheless, I shook it off and continued to the dining room. My host father (we all called him “Papá”), a short, stern looking man with thick brows and a dark mustache sat at the end of the table with a newspaper in one hand and a forkful of egg in the other. He lowered his newspaper to greet me.

“Buenos días,” he calmly and quietly said. I smiled back at him. Just then, my host aunt Gracie, a very cheerful and chubby Mayan lady in her mid-fifties, pulled a chair out and gestured for me to sit down. She plopped a plate loaded with breakfast and a glass of fresh fruit juice in front of me and kissed me on the cheek.

It wasn’t long before Carolina, my host sister, a breathtaking sixteen year-old dressed in short shorts and a tight t-shirt, sat down right across from me and joyfully waved at me from the other side of the table. Gracie’s daughter, Meruka, a short, stout, yet fine-looking young woman of seventeen, shook her head and giggled as Carolina shot off a bunch of questions in my direction. Flustered because of the impossibility of me understanding her speedy Spanish, I giggled along with the rest of my family. After I patiently translated her questions about what I thought of Mexico so far, Gracie, Carolina, and I kissed the rest of the family goodbye and headed for Merida’s Center.

As we stepped outside, a young boy of about seven stopped his bicycle in front of us and asked us if we’d like to purchase some bread. I glanced around the neighborhood while this boy spoke with

Gracie. All of the houses looked exactly the same, had a bright white color, and were at most six inches apart. Gracie ended up purchasing the bread and set off back to the house to put the bread in the kitchen.

We set out for Merida's center in the now blistering heat of early June. The sounds of booming businesses of the early afternoon filled my ears. The interaction of the people with one another overlapped as it took place out in the open. Even with all the excitement and all the joys of experiencing a new culture, I felt sadness as I looked around and saw shabbily dressed, sickly, damaged-looking people sulking around begging for money. I saw young children with backpacks of merchandise pleading with the Merida citizens to buy their items; it seemed the townspeople did not pay any mind. I noticed that Carolina and Gracie, quite a ways ahead of me, just kept walking. I scampered towards them.

We walked up and down the streets of Merida's center. I was trudging along about ten feet behind my host aunt and host sister. When we arrived at the candy stand, we tried hard to dodge all of the bees and hornets swarming around. One woman peeked through the screen in front of the candy, and after swatting at a hornet yelped in pain from the sting. The candy stand was on the sidewalk, thankfully under some shade. I looked through the screen and noticed the bees swarming around the candy. I lost interest right away. Bees must not bother the Mexican people, because Gracie and Carolina carried on with their business.

The salesman, a scruffy looking man with messy hair and leather skin, was smoking a cigar right next to all of the candy. My host aunt snapped at him to put it out, but he continued smoking. With a cigar in his mouth, he said, "This candy, fifty pesos."

"That's too much. I won't pay that much," Gracie firmly stated. Although such bartering usually interests me, I still couldn't quite understand the fast paced Spanish. I turned around and looked down the street to take in all of this new culture. While Gracie and Carolina bartered with the salesman, I started toward the next-door meat stand. So many homeless and skinny dogs were sauntering around, starving. I decided to buy some beef for a couple of the dogs. As I bent down to feed one of these unfortunate pups, I heard music and singing. I set the meat down on the ground and stood up to see where the music came from. Straight across from the meat stand, an elder man, blind and one legged played a keyboard and sang for the passer-bys. A can sat in front of him, so I trudged over and dropped a bit of money into it. I felt so bad for him that I tapped his arm and told him what beautiful music he played. Carolina's voice rang out over the bustle of the Mexican people.

"Ashley! Ashley!" I sensed urgency. I rushed back to the candy stand. Halfway there, a beggar woman approached me. I was about a foot taller than this woman. She looked up into my eyes. I saw the pain she went through all throughout her life, and I took notice of the pleading in her voice when she raised her hands in a cupped fashion and asked, "¿Dinero, por favor?"

I reached into my wallet to get money out for this beggar woman. She looked all too appreciative. I dropped 200 pesos into her hands. I thought to myself that this woman has probably never seen this amount of money in her lifetime. Gracie abruptly interrupted my thoughts when she stepped between the beggar and me and swiped the money right out of the woman's callused hands.

"¡Necesitas trabajar para tu dinero!" Gracie yelled in the beggar's face and pointed her finger at the poor unfortunate

woman. Carolina continued towards other shops.

The woman looked at me confusedly. Streaks of tears fell down the beggar's leather face. She hung her head, looked at my host aunt, then looked at me and asked me one last time, "¿Por favor?"

Gracie briskly veered in my direction and sternly said, "¡No!" I looked at the beggar woman with apologetic eyes and said, "I'm so sorry."

She turned away from us and slowly sulked away. Gracie put a hand on my shoulder and asked me not to feel bad for this woman who does not work. Distraught by the day's events, I proposed that the three of us return home.

That evening while swinging myself to sleep in the hammock, I closed my eyes, offered a prayer to those in need all around the world, and woke up the next morning to the smell of fresh fruit and fried eggs.

New Friends

by *Samantha Carlson*

At the beginning of my 10th grade school year, I changed schools and the other students marked me as the "new kid" on campus. An invisible barrier separated me from the other students and no matter what I tried, nothing dissolved it. It took a couple weeks before anyone would talk to me, but once a couple students did, they invited me to a sleepover. I must admit I was shy, but I had no friends, so what could I possibly have to lose? The sleepover was at Wendy's house, the quiet one in the group. The other two girls, Isabelle and Toni, were best friends.

The whole situation started at Wendy's house in her room. Her room contained a bunk bed by the door against the

wall and a television stand underneath the window, but everything else she stuffed in the closet. We all lay on the floor discussing our plans for the night. I was still shy and I didn't want to give any input, but Isabelle had an idea.

"You guys want to go teepee a house?" she asked.

Teepee? I had never heard of that before. I was curious to find out what it was. "Does it take long?" I asked.

"Not that long. It all depends on whether they're home or not," Toni replied as she looked at me.

"Now?" I asked. I didn't want to ask how to teepee because I was afraid of them making fun of me for not knowing.

"Sure, why not?" Isabelle replied as she stood up.

"I'll go grab some toilet paper," Wendy said as she stood up and left her bedroom.

"We'll do a house close by so we don't have to walk that far," Isabelle said as she put on a jacket.

"Have you ever toilet papered a house before Sam?" Toni asked as she turned to me.

I didn't know how to answer. If I lied, then they might ask me to go first and I could make a complete fool of myself. Then again, if I said no, they might mock me anyway, and so I answered the best I could. "My brother did it once." It wasn't a complete lie, he had done it before, but he never told me about it. He had arrived late one night and came in through the back door and made me promise not to tell our parents. I promised after he told me what he had been doing so late.

"Are we ready?" Wendy asked as she came back into the room.

"Yeah," Isabelle and Toni both replied together.

"Your parents won't say anything about us leaving?" I asked Wendy.

“No, they’re cool about it,” she replied as she led the way out of the room.

Once we got out of the house, we watched Isabelle go into Wendy’s garage and a couple minutes later she came back out with a spray can. She didn’t say anything but put it in her pocket and led the way down the street. I wasn’t sure of where we were headed but I followed in silence. The night air was cold, but not cold enough to pierce my jacket. As we walked, I could detect this uneasy feeling in my stomach. Why was I so willing to do this? I asked myself over and over. We walked down another street in silence and then Isabelle stopped in front of a one story house. In front of the house, a small yard was filled with weeds and miscellaneous tools. Off to the right side of the property in the back, stood a small mobile home and a car parked in front of it.

“Here?” I asked.

“Yep,” Isabelle replied with confidence.

“The side house,” Toni said as she jumped the fence.

I restudied the landscape and realized the house belonged to one of my old friend’s grandpa, and that my friend lived in the mobile home on the property. “Why did you guys choose this house?” I asked after I jumped the fence.

“You may not have gone to school long enough to know this yet, but a girl named Carly lives here and she is so annoying. She can never stop talking and we don’t like her that much. We just want to play a little prank on her,” Isabelle replied once I reached her.

“I see,” I replied. At this point I was starting to have doubts. Doubts about being here and whether I chose the right friends or not.

We silently walked over to the dark mobile home. A couple trees stood in the yard, and Toni walked over to one of them,

while starting to unroll a roll of toilet paper. Once she thought she had enough, she tossed it over the tree, leaving a white trail on the leaves. ‘So this is what you do when you teepee’, I thought. Wendy soon joined her and they seemed to be having fun. I didn’t know what to do. Half of me wanted to leave and wait for them outside the yard, but the other half told me to stop being a chicken.

It wasn’t until Isabelle pulled out the spray paint and started spraying all over the house that I had had enough. She was writing unkind words that not even I could repeat. Did she really hate this girl that much?

“Stop,” I said to her. She ignored me and continued to spray paint the side of the house. Toni and Wendy were busy trying to teepee another tree in the front yard and they couldn’t hear us. “Stop,” I repeated, this time in a stricter voice. Isabelle stopped this time and acknowledged me standing behind her.

“Why?” she asked as she turned around.

“Because this is wrong; even if you don’t like her. She doesn’t deserve this,” I replied as I looked her in the eyes.

“You’re a wimp Sam,” She said as she started walking toward me. I stood my ground because I didn’t know what else to do.

“It takes one to know one,” I finally replied. I knew that was a childish remark, but it just came to me. That seemed to get her really angry. She threw down the spray can and charged me. Before I could react we were both rolling around on the ground. We weren’t actually fighting; it just seemed to be rough enough.

“Stop it Izzi!” I shouted as I held her down to the ground. Izzi was the nickname everyone called her at school. I didn’t care if anyone woke up from me yelling, I just wanted her to stop. She was lying flat on her

stomach and I had one of my knees on her back, one of the techniques my dad had taught me to use in self defense. Toni and Wendy must have heard us because they came running over. For some reason I felt better after fighting Izzi and standing up for myself.

“What’s going on?” Toni asked. I released Izzi and we both stood up.

“Nothing,” Izzi said as she looked at me.

“Are we done here?” I asked.

There was silence for a minute and then Izzi replied. “Yeah, let’s get back to Wendy’s house.” She glared at me as she walked by and went back to the fence.

After that night, I stopped hanging out with my “new” friends. They didn’t bother me either because I think they were afraid that I might say something about that night. I realized I should’ve learned more about them and their reputation before I agreed to go out and do something stupid with them, but I also learned it is better to stand up for what I think is right than to be just another part of the crowd. As for my friend’s house, I helped her clean up the toilet paper and repaint the house, even though I never told her who was responsible.

The Sleeping Legend

by *Arren St. Vincent*

Anyone who plays on Valley City State University’s football team will learn to respect and admire one man, Jim Dew. One of the first questions incoming freshmen ask during fall camp is, “Who’s the old guy on the bike?” Returning veteran players respond by saying, “That’s former Head Coach Jim Dew.” The tone in their voice tells anyone listening that they have nothing but great respect for the man. When I heard this all I could think about was my dad

telling me about his days playing for Coach Dew. I found it hard to believe that this now quiet and seemingly humble man once during a game grabbed my father’s finger and set it back into place and sent him back out on to the field.

Once I talked with some other former players however, everyone said the same thing: Coach Dew was one of the most competitive coach’s they had ever played for. Valley City State Assistant Coach and former All-American linebacker Dave Rausch said he was the dominating personality on the field. “When you stepped on to the field there was no question that he was in charge of the team and practice. It was his way or the high way,” stated Rausch. All the while, I still couldn’t imagine this mild mannered man being this dominating, driving force for Viking football.

In my experience it is hard to find a man that has done so much with as much class and humility as Coach Dew. His willingness to give credit to others who have influenced him rather than people he has obviously influenced should be an example to all of us, although, his greatest quality could possibly be in his dedication to the development of young players and coaches.

While coaching at Valley City State Coach Dew did much for Viking football, during his tenure there he won eight Conference titles and had three nationally ranked teams in 1976, 1980, and 1988. When asked what team was his favorite he simply said, “Every team was unique and special. It helped me stay in the game so long. But, if I had to pick a team it would be the 1976 team because it was one of the best, if not the best team the conference had ever seen.” He had many more winning seasons before his retirement in 1994, at which time he had compiled the best career record in school history with 116 wins, 65 losses, and 2 ties. Probably the most

amazing thing about Coach Dew's legacy is that when anyone looks at all the championship banners and winning season records, no one would know that he was the coach of the team all those years. His willingness to put the team ahead of his own glory shows a level of class that is very rare in sports today.

This more than likely stems from his humble beginnings, Coach Jim Dew was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland. He was the only boy in his family and from an early age loved athletics. At Mount St. Joe High School, he became a standout athlete in both football and baseball. After graduating from high school, Jim decided to attend college at Mayville State University where he played football and baseball. When he arrived there he became a stellar athlete right away and eventually received All American status in both sports.

While attending Mayville State University, Coach Dew met two out of the three men that had a large influence on his coaching career; baseball coach Al Mayer and football coach Jerome Berg. These two men played a huge role in helping Coach Dew develop his own coaching philosophies. Then in 1974, in his first year at Valley City State he met the third man that impacted his coaching career greatly, the late Athletic Director Bill Osmon. When commenting on Osmon, Coach Dew said, "I was very impressed with his (Osmon) dedication to the school and the student athletes," a quality that both men possessed and showed in how they were able to put the school and their teams above themselves.

When asked why Dew got into coaching and how he accounted for all the winning seasons. He said, "First of all, I got into coaching to help in the development of young people. I wanted the players to turn into productive citizens after football because that's the most important thing. Winning games and championships was just

a reward." He went on to say, "The game (football) and the kids should come before yourself. If you are in coaching for yourself you are in the wrong profession." I know he truly believes in this because he still loves to come to practice and games and quietly watch his Vikings play.

A neat thing to keep in mind is that while he was winning all these games and championships he was influencing young coaches behind the scenes. He helped to inspire players to get into coaching and helped give them the tools they needed to have success in football. When Rausch was asked what it was like coaching under Dew his first couple of seasons he said, "He was a great role model and very supportive in bettering myself as a coach." As I reflect on all the players he has influenced in their coaching careers it amazes me. I know at least five coaches that were influenced by the legendary coach and if those five influence five more the coaching tree just keeps growing and growing and it can all be traced back to one man, Coach Dew.

Coach Jim Dew possesses many admirable qualities, and most of us could only hope to one day share in these great attributes. If any of you are ever around the Valley City area in the fall and you happen to swing past the practice field, you just might catch a glimpse of the old coach standing near his bike quietly watching the game and team he has devoted most of his life to.

A Cinderella Story

by Shannon Leppert

On November 30, 2004, the Building Democracy Initiative wrote an article about the trial that put Gordon Winrod behind bars: "One grandchild escaped Winrod's farm in 2000, testifying that Winrod had

whipped them and put them in solitary confinement for misbehavior, and brainwashed the children against their own family.” That grandchild is my sister, a 25-year-old beautiful blonde bubbling over with energy, named Erika Leppert. Her personality is like the morning sun, pleasantly warm and always filling the atmosphere with delight. Looking into Erika’s vibrant blue eyes, one would never know her life story could be the story line for a horror movie.

I recently got the chance to interview Erika. Previous to this experience I thought I knew all the trials my sister had been put through in her life, but during this interview, I came to realize what a determined, courageous, emotionally strong, and forgiving person my sister really is. Erika is a Cinderella, once deprived of her dreams, who has come to realize that dreams really can come true.

Erika shows her determination not only through her everyday accomplishments but also her educational achievements. Every Tuesday night I babysit for Erika while she is in her college Chemistry class. One particular Tuesday my sister burst through the door. “Can you believe it?” she beamed, “I got my Chemistry test back with the highest grade in the class!” Her face was vivid with joy as she picked up her six-month-old son and sat down on the couch. In all honesty, I really couldn’t believe it. Not only had Erika been through many terrible experiences in her life, but she had only a 5th grade education before she earned her GED. Determination and hard work is why Erika, who had so few opportunities, is where she is today.

Going through such intense physical and emotional abuse and still having a positive outlook on life proves how courageous my sister is. Erika told me many drastic stories that harmed her both mentally and physically, but one, she said, affected

her more than the rest. She described it as “the worst day of my life.” It was March 8, 1996, at about 4:30 in the morning. She depicted the morning as brisk, the temperature around 10°F, and all she had was a sleeping bag to keep her warm. The already sick, 14-year-old girl was on guard duty, watching for potential Jew invaders, coming to murder them. She was getting very cold and tired so she moved out of the wind to a different spot where she could see the gate, and cuddled in her sleeping bag, soon after falling fast asleep. They had radios to use for signals, one click if an enemy was coming, and two if it was family. While she was asleep our grandfather went through the gate to get the mail, and when he went back to the house the others in the house said they heard no signal, so Gordon went to look for her. She had moved from the spot she was supposed to be, so he couldn’t find her but kept on looking and calling to her. He went through the gate again, by now she was awake and saw him so she signaled.

Later, she went to breakfast, as soon as she entered the front door, all hell broke loose. She remembers multiple family members shouting at her, “Where were you?” “Why didn’t you answer grandpa’s calls?” “Why didn’t you key the radio?”

“But I did key the radio,” she retorted, not knowing that Gordon went through the gate twice.

“She is just being rebellious and needs the devil beat out of her,” Gordon declared. He turned to our mother and said, “Either you do it or I will.”

Confused and terrified, she was yanked by her mother to the guest bedroom up stairs and brutally beaten. All the while she could hear my oldest brother, Nathan, as he pounded and scratched at the door, screaming for mom to stop. “Let me in, let me in,” he sobbed, but the door was locked

and they would not let him near his mistreated sister.

My mother beat her 40 times and Erika's hands and arms were so swollen she could hardly move them. The next morning Mom left without a word; little did Erika know that the next time she would see her mother, it would be behind bars. Mom, along with my brother, aunt, and uncle, were arrested in 1998 attempting to kidnap me. This was a punch Erika was not prepared to dodge. The only person she looked up to and respected, our mother, was taken from her. As she told me, "I always wanted to be just like her. She could sing, ride horse, draw, and she was always fun to be around." With her mother gone, she realized she would not be able to tolerate living with her grandfather. "I knew I couldn't stay with Gordon anymore, I could only think about getting away."

Erika will be the first to admit that she could not have accomplished escaping alone. Without Nathan's help it would have been much more difficult evading our grandfather. When Nathan turned 18, he was released from the Boy's Ranch, where he most certainly was influenced and molested by "blood-sucking Jews". He immediately went to Missouri and helped persuade Gordon that Erika should go to North Dakota to help save me from the "child rapists", my dad and his family. This was Erika's ticket out of that life she loathed. "It was really depressing, staring down life with no future but what Gordon had planned for me," she said drily. Yet, Erika was not prepared to live with the people she had been assured would try to rape and kill her.

Nathan brought her to the Leppert farm and she was given the choice to stay with her father, grandparents, or foster parents. She recalls not wanting to live with her father at first. "I just wanted to be free of both sides and not have to choose between

my mother or my father." But, she was left with no other choice but to stay on the farm. "I was so exhausted I slept for two days and when I woke up I knew I had to go visit my mother."

Erika prepared herself mentally; she knew her emotional strength was once again going to be put to a test. She went to visit her mother at the Jamestown prison. She had to know if mom was telling her the truth about her father. Mom told her she had been lying the past 10 years, but wouldn't admit it to everyone. "I was so disappointed," she told me. "Mom was so willful, so strong, yet she couldn't admit she was wrong." Then Erika walked to the jail door, turned and said to our Mom, "You are not the person I thought you were." Later, in recounting all of this to me, she said, "Everything I knew, everything I believed just crumbled. In that instant I knew I had made the right decision by coming to North Dakota." I knew, or thought I knew, the toll this whole experience had on my sister, but she never ceased to astonish me.

What surprised me the most about my astounding sister is the capacity of forgiveness she has in her heart. She doesn't see her experience has being negative. She doesn't use it as an excuse to feel sorry for herself, or let other feel sorry for her. In fact, she feels the exact opposite. "I'm not bitter from what has happened," she told me. "I know now that I can overcome anything. It has made me aim higher, just to prove to myself I can do what I set my mind to."

This free spirited young lady not only took charge of her future, she made use of all the opportunities she was given with ambition that has made her hit above all the marks. Two years after coming to North Dakota, she received a remarkably high score on her GED, and then became a very successful Miss Rodeo North Dakota Winter Show Queen. Three years after that she was

the first child in our entire family to enroll in college, and immediately landed on the Dean's list. Erika just recently married and gave birth to a baby boy named Ryan, her pride and joy. She is now working toward a Biology major in hopes of one day becoming a successful Equine Veterinarian. As for the future, Erika told me, "I want to someday have a nice house and have more time to spend with my husband and my horses." Rocking her heavy-eyed baby, she utters with a twinkle in her eye. "My dreams have been my inspiration, I am a dreamer."

My sister is an amazing person that everyone should have the honor of meeting. Her passion for life and ambition inspires everyone she is around to strive for something better. She is always carefree and joyful, yet one gets a sense that she has overcome many trials in life that have transformed her into the wonderful person she is today. The story she has to tell is truly a "Cinderella Story."



Rays Shooting Out
Mary Kennedy