

MINERAL AREA COUNCIL ON THE ARTS

2020 CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST
WINNER

Theme: The Journey

10th - 12th Grade Short Story

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The Journey

One year. It had been exactly 365 days since I had gotten home. One year away from the piercing sound of gunfire. One year away from the agonizing scream from my fallen comrades. One year of peace that had become a stranger to me. One year of peace that I haven't had since December 1, 1969. I came back from the service on May 1st, 1975. Six years of my life that I have dedicated to my country. 2,190 days that I do not regret but do not want to ever relive. If you would've told me on my 19th birthday that just three short weeks later I would be drafted for the Vietnam War, I would've laughed at you. I couldn't abandon my family. I couldn't leave the life I had and all the normalcy I've ever known. But I had to. There was no other choice.

My time in basics was hard and gruelling. I had to be instructed on the fundamentals like how to use a gun and how to defend myself. These were skills that I thought I would never have to worry about. I didn't hunt back home and I never had to protect myself because we lived in a pretty decent part of town. Looking back, I wish I would've been prepared. I had to train my body to be strong and to go hours and hours without proper nutrition because *that's what it's going to be like on the battlefield*. Those 10 words are engraved in my head. Those words were like the Bible when it came to our commanders and generals. They repeated it every chance they got. I had to get used to not only sleepless nights but possibly even sleepless days. No one knew when we would get the chance to rest, or as my brothers and I liked to call it, refuel. You could never truly rest after you have witnessed the nightmare that we call war.

I wish I would've known that the months I spent training and years I spent fighting were going to affect me like they have. "PTSD and depression are things we need to watch for. Fortunately for you, you're not the first so we know what to expect." my doctor said. None of it really made sense to me until I started to experience it. I would wake up in the middle of the night screaming and my wife wouldn't be able to snap me out of it. I found myself wanting to stay home and never go out in fear of someone asking me about my experience. I guess that's what was stopping me. Fear. You don't understand how much

trouble something is causing you until you actually sit down and think about it. The only problem is, you don't know how to stop thinking about it.

My PTSD, or night episodes, started out harmless but then began to get awful very fast. The worst one is why I don't sleep at night. I wait for my wife to leave for work and that's when I go to bed. I just can't risk scaring her like that again... One night, I "woke up" and started running to the kitchen.

I grabbed a knife and started screaming "Don't touch him! Don't touch him! He's only just a kid!" My wife said she woke up to me screaming and saw that I had a knife in my hand. She ran towards me and somehow got control of the knife and laid me down on the couch. She went back into our bedroom and locked the door, she was afraid for her life. I was so angry at myself when she told me about it the next day. I hate that I have no memory of what happens during my night episodes. I hate even more that I can't control myself like everyone else.

The depression was mild, but trust me, it was there. It was a fight every single day to muster up the courage to get out of bed. I just didn't want to face the daunting reality of what I've been through. Even though I wasn't in the service right now, I was reliving it every day. I thought about it all the time. It started to ruin relationships that I've had since I was 3 years old. I was in such a dark place. A place that most people never experience. Suicide was looking like a very desirable choice. Ending all the pain, sadness, and suffering. Never having to feel anything ever again.

But that's the thing, I would never get to feel the butterflies in my stomach when my wife walked in the door after being gone all day. I would never get to feel the warmth and love of visiting my family and spending time with them. I would miss out on all the great moments in life just because I was being a coward. These reasons are what made me fight. They made me realize that I could overcome this. I wasn't going to let PTSD and depression take over my life. I was so much stronger than that.

My first step was to go back to my doctor. I told him about everything that was going on and that I was finally ready to face what I was going through. "Medicine." That was his first response. I immediately shut it down. If I was going to fight this, I needed to do it without the assistance of a substance manipulating my brain. I wanted to be the one to change. Not some kind of drug. "Well I could

send you to a therapist. Dr. Gary Cooper. He's one of the best." A therapist? Absolutely not. Telling all of my thoughts and feelings to a complete stranger was not high on my bucket list. I didn't want to look vulnerable and weak. The only other person that knew I was struggling was my wife and I wanted to keep it that way. "No," I said. "I can't do that."

"I'm sorry then Thomas. There's nothing more I can do for you." my doctor said.

You have got to be joking. My only choices were drugs or talking to a stranger.

"No, there has to be something else. That can't be it!"

"Unfortunately it is. It's up to you now." he said sadly.

I couldn't believe it. I had no idea what to do. Both of those options were horrible. Explain my whole life story to someone who either wouldn't understand or tell me to talk about it some more, or get hooked on drugs and take them for the rest of my life. I didn't know what to choose. But what I did know was that I wanted to be fixed. I didn't want to be like this anymore. Something had to be done. If those were my only possibilities, then I needed to decide.

I started seeing a therapist three days a week. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 10:00 a.m. I would pay a visit to Dr. Cooper. Getting started was always the hardest. Once I did, I couldn't stop talking. This was a sign that I made the right decision because all of these feelings were stuck in my head and didn't have a way to escape. Trust was a big thing for me. Surprisingly, I found it easy to trust Dr. Cooper. I don't know if it was because legally he couldn't tell anyone what I talked about or that he was just genuinely interested in helping me get better. Whatever it was, I'm glad it made me trust him.

For the first couple of weeks, Dr. Cooper's office was my safe place, I looked forward to talking to him and figuring out how to deal with things. I noticed myself slowly starting to get better. There were a lot less night episodes. I guess that's because I didn't have to deal with my feelings on my own and I could actually get them out. The depression was the easiest to get control of. I found reasons to be happy. I looked for the good in every situation. And to think that it all started because of me. I pushed myself to change and to get better. That is something I will always be proud of.

My time with Dr. Cooper started to lessen after each visit. I used to see him three days a week, but I have made so much progress that I only have to go once a month now. I don't rely on him as much as I did. He taught me how to handle my feelings and to not feel sorry for myself anymore. I am two months free of my night episodes and my depression has vanished. All because I didn't give up.

I am here to tell you to not give up. To keep fighting. That even though things might be extremely difficult in your life, keep going. Don't let whatever you're battling consume you and steal your happiness. Although it might be hard, look for the good. Know that it is ok to need help. You are not less of a person just because you need some support and guidance to get you past whatever you are going through. Suicide is never the answer.