



President Gerald R. Ford Student Writing Challenge 2020 Theme: *Determination*



Each year the theme for the President Gerald R. Ford Student Writing Challenge reflects on an important part of Gerald R. Ford's character. High school students from public, private, city, suburban, rural and home schools participate in the contest. Out of 700 entries, this booklet features the 2020 top ten finalists.

“You never know what you can do, until you have to do it.”

- First Lady Betty Ford

2020 Writing Challenge Prompt



Throughout their lives, President Gerald Ford and First Lady Betty Ford showed their sense of **determination** and **grit** time and time again: by overcoming adversity in childhood, facing grave danger in WWII, beating cancer, overcoming substance abuse, and leading our country through one of the greatest Constitutional crises in its history.

This year we invited you to share your thoughts on the topic of determination. We asked you to share YOUR definitions of determination, grit, and perseverance. We received hundreds of beautifully written essays and narratives of people who exemplified these characteristics – many of them were your own family members, some of them were even you.

Meet our 2020 Final Round Judges...

All entries undergo a thorough judging process. Our first and second round judging panels are composed of educators and community members. Entries that make it to the final round are read and scored by a select group of judges, chosen for their expertise in communication and contributions to their community.

Judge Christina Elmore

Judge Christina Elmore is the first African American woman to serve as a Kent County Circuit Court Judge. Prior to that, she was a judge for the 61st District Court, a Judge Advocate General for the United States Air Force, and an assistant prosecutor in Kent County. She earned her undergrad from the University of Michigan and her law degree from Tulane Law School.

Daniel Boothe

Daniel Boothe is an award-winning journalist and on-air personality for WGTV Public Media, NPR and PBS in West and Southwest Michigan. He received his Master's Degree in Communications from Grand Valley State University and his undergrad from The University of Missouri, KC. Go Blue.

Christy Dykgraaf

Christy Dykgraaf is a retired Language Arts and French Exploratory teacher from East Rockford Middle School and a retired Adjunct Instructor in English from GRCC. She writes memoir and poetry and has professionally published her education policy research.

“Thump”

Isabel Gil

Forest Hills Eastern High School

First Place

I watch him ascend to the top of the rock wall, the faint smell of feet and particles of chalk dust tickling my nose. My mom stands next to me, shouting praise with every *thump* of my brother's hand grabbing another colorful stone on his journey to the top. At that moment, I do not remember it. None of us do.

Thump. We do not remember his unfocused, bouncing eyes-- the hundreds of daily “simple partial seizures” plaguing his tiny body, leading to a further diagnosis by a pediatrician that he had suffered a stroke before reaching five months of age.

Thump. My mother does not remember holding the limp infant, incoherent with layered drugs and obscured by wires weaved across his head, being told by the neurologist that her baby boy would have to undergo a hemispherectomy: a massive surgery in which a team of neurosurgeons would enter his infant skull, cut through the corpus callosum, and disconnect and remove a portion of the right half of his brain in order to keep the left half from learning its seizure tendencies.

Thump. I cannot remember being pulled from watching *Finding Nemo* in the waiting room, and being taken into the room to see him, where he lay motionless in a tiny bed, dry blood webbed across his head. I cannot remember being scarred by the sight of such a breach in nature-- the sight of something so innocent being tainted by the smell of disinfectants and the unignorable red caking his hair.

Thump. I know he does not remember the hours and weeks and years of speech, physical, and occupational therapy: teaching him how to exceed the ten-word outlook his doctors had predicted, teaching him how to surpass the limitations posed upon a boy who could only use half of his body, teaching him what comes to lucky children so easily-- the ability to play, romp, and roam with no avail.

A victorious clanging rings out from over our heads. My brother is high above us, swatting at the bell above the peak of the wall. We all whoop joyously as he is softly belayed down. The length of descent makes the progress of his climb even more evident. He lands on the padded ground, a goofy smile plastered on his face with a twinkling perseverance in his eyes-- the same perseverance I see when he talks about one day playing for the NHL, winning American Ninja Warrior, and inventing his own water park.

My little brother is fifteen now, and some things have changed. He has a man-bun, shaves every few days, and no longer likes it when I kiss his cheeks in public. Like every teenager, the horizons of his dreams have narrowed. However, many consistencies prevail. The same persistent glimmer in his eyes emerges when I quiz him for his biology tests, when he fills out his March Madness brackets, and when he suggests that I apply to any university with a sports record meeting his specific criteria. I see it when he cheers on his favorite teams at hockey games, and when he rattles off NHL statistics, leaving me confused as to how one head could store so much information.

Whenever I feel encumbered by the trivial issues of my own teenage life, I breathe and ground myself, allowing my heart to beat in time with the internalized thumping of my hero's beautiful right hand on the rock wall. I picture his big brown eyes, curtained with lashes I envy, sparkling with the determination of a person who has already overcome more than most people ever will in their whole lives. I know that if I attack my future with the same persistence and willingness as he does his everyday life, success is unavoidable.

“Dear Determination”
Lillian Van Gelderen
Hart High School
Second Place

Dear Determination,
Please show who you are,
to me and to the world.
You are needed,
but not known.
You are yearned for,
but not met.
So please, oh please,
show us who you are.

Are you a sprint,
lasting only as long as we think we can?
running the race,
going all out,
then giving up
after 52.7 seconds
because only one person had passed?

Are you a weak minded soul,
who has lost all of their self-control?
Have you fallen back under the spell,
that has once labeled you as an addict?
Have you given up
on trying to gain back the trust
from the people who care for you the most?
Have you given up
on trying to save yourself?

If there is a bump in the road,
do you give up hope, trying to pass?
If something happens
when you had almost passed,

That you had yearned wouldn't,
would you give up right then and there
because you would believe you couldn't?

Oh, dear Determination,
I believe I now see,
what you mean to the world and me.

For you are a marathon,
and you are long and tiring.
I watch as people pass me by,
but I know I am running my race
because you are running along my side.

So I don't give up,
and I run through the line,
as I turn my head to smile at my time.

You have torn apart the labels:

weak,
addict,
freak.

You have broken the spell,
with the help of you,
they are free.

Free from the chains of shame and humiliation.

Maybe they have won back their love,
or have been embraced once again,
from their family they had once lost
and feared would never see again.

You are the final payment,
and the cap and gown,
after countless hours
of all work and no play.
You are the late nights of studying,
the early mornings of classes,

and the tiring shifts of waitressing in between.

The tears shed,
the headaches pounding,
the eyes drifting.

But it was worth it.

It was all worth it.

You take unwanted situations,
and turn them into beautiful outcomes.

You turn the bumps in the road,
into a thrilling ride of joy and glee.

You use the criticism of others,
and build it into a stronghold for motivation.

You use the hatred toward ourselves,
as a passion to work harder,
to change what we loathe,
to push ourselves for the better.

You help someone climb their mountain,
fight the winds,
and overcome the struggles
they couldn't win.

With you,
they are able to stand on top of their mountain,
with one world behind them,
and a new one beyond them.

They can hear the wind
whip through their hair
and curl itself around their limbs,
as they stand, arms stretched free,
as free as their souls in this very moment.

They can see the colors of the skies above,
the skies of freedom,
strength,
forgiveness,

and love.

They have used you to their will,
and in whatever the need.

But the funny thing is, dear Determination,
you have been with us all along,
within our minds and within our hearts
we have just never opened the door,
To set you free.

Dear Determination,
this is what you mean
to the world and me.

"Firmness of Purpose"

Harlie B. Chophonis

Hart High School

Third Place

"Nothing can withstand the power of the human will if it is willing to stake its very existence to the extent of its purpose." -- Benjamin Disraeli

What is my purpose?

Is a question we ask ourselves

It is our mystery in life

To figure out who we are meant to be

Everyone wants success

But how do we get there

Standing on the top of that mountain

Feeling relief, thinking

"I did it"

What does it take

To be that person?

Determination.

When we picture a determined person

We picture someone strong

Who stares down the face of fear

And pushes obstacles and challenges

Out of their way

Who stands in their place

Letting nothing knock them over

Unwavering as they reach their goals

Ignoring the haters

And welcoming true friends

We see a person who can do anything

And be anything

Because they decided to do so

But do you have to be strong and fearless

To be determined?

July 31st, 2006

The day my brother was born
A frightening but exciting day
For me as a new big sister
I was traveling into uncharted waters
Never before seen
I was eager to see him
Just as any child would be
Curious to know
How much this would change my life
Feeling unsure of the new future
Now knowing that the future
Was one I didn't even know
Was possible

My brother seemed normal
Until we noticed things
That were unexplainable
He hadn't developed right
He was too small
5 pounds and 3 ounces
He was so weak
So fragile-looking
Fighting to live
Something was wrong
But what?

It took a long time
For doctors to figure out
Why this was happening
Why he was struggling to survive
As a child, it was hard to comprehend
The gravity of my brother's fate

That he was the one
Out of 100,000 others
That was born with
XXXXY Syndrome

XXXXY Syndrome is genetic
Where a boy gets 3 extra X chromosomes
Accompanied by intellectual and developmental
Disabilities
His genetic make-up
Made him weak
Made him dainty and delicate
Made it difficult
For him to persevere
And grow up to be healthy and strong
Like any other normal person

He required many surgeries
To fix critical problems
I remember many hospital trips
Spending the nights
Waiting
Waiting to hear that everything
Was going to be okay
That he was going to be okay
And miraculously,
We were able to bring my brother home
Every time

Though he still faced obstacles
I remember feeding him through a tube
That attached to his stomach
Because he couldn't eat
Like the rest of us

I remember him coughing through the night
Because of aspirating so often
My parents fearing to fall asleep
Because they were unsure if he could breathe
There was even a period of time
When it was unclear what he was saying
Because we couldn't understand him

Despite the challenges,
My brother eventually got better
He's 13 years old now
He's healthy and is the most outgoing person I know
He's funny and kind and
Has a huge heart
He's goofy and mischievous
Just as a brother should be
And finds ways to brighten up
Everyone else's day
He loves cars and trucks
And working with my dad in the garage
He loves eating macaroni and cheese
With hotdogs
He loves telling grand stories
That he generates
From little moments of his day

My brother, Luke, is a very special person
But he wasn't strong or fearless
His determination came from
Somewhere else
It was his will to live
To serve his purpose
That made him determined
His purpose

To be my brother
And my friend

Being determined doesn't mean being
Strong or fearless
Being determined means
Having a purpose
That mountain is waiting for us
To climb to the top
What is my purpose?
Is a question we must ask ourselves
To ensure success
Be determined to
Find that purpose

“The Survivor”
Megan Grant
Newaygo High School
Honorable Mention

I don't mean to be dramatic.
My mind tends to run irrationally
On strange, devolving tracks

It falls down rabbit holes
Filled with worse-case scenarios
And monsters under beds

It hurtles into the hopeless
And hides there
Like a child
Hiding from the dark.

There's a space in my heart,
Where the hurt decided to stay.
Like stagnant water
By a grave

It was only a year ago
When I was prescribed my first fix-it pill
But DNA is finicky
And my head combusted into a searing pain
That laid me out on my back for days,
Unable to open my eyes
Because of the light.

I escaped, but after that

My world tilted on its axis
In a delightfully sickening vertigo
That clenched at my head and throat
At all times

And
even with that.
I picked up,
And I kept going.

The next pill was fruitless
As a desert tree in the dry season;
I tried tapping at pressure points
And sitting in the dark,
Labeling my thoughts
“Thought”
“Sensation”
But this too, could not restore my balance.

While riding this seesaw,
I made art
I poured the emotion into dance
And paint

I made worlds in my dark,
Worlds with stars,
And flowers with pink petals,
That no one would ever see.

I made art,
picked up,
and kept going.

Another drug, another fallout.
It was dynamite,
And getting picked up from school early
To keep my safe
From me

Doesn't that sound theatric?

It's true, though.
My mind was my own worst enemy
And it whispered beautiful little lies
That made the world wilt sickeningly
And smell of sugar-sweet rot
Even with the smell in my nose,
I lived all that out,
Picked up,
And kept going.

That summer,
The anxiety exploded
And I trembled in fear
And panicked at ghosts of futures
That did not exist.

Mentally, I tripped over every stone in my path
And reeled from the fall,
Even if it never happened.

A fear held my heart as it had never done so before.

My mobility shattered with an injury,
And my mental state went with it.
I was so sad.
I was so alone.
And I was back into the doctor's office
One more pill, one more cast

This pill swung me lower than all the other lows
It threw me into manic highs,
Laced with horror;
Then dropped me
Into the darkest of all the dark
I'd ever seen.

All I could see
Were red lines
And little wrists

But we are not meant to dwell on these phantoms.
I siphoned from the strength offered to me by my family,
And fed my determination with it,
Because we are not meant to be controlled by our minds

So
I picked up.
And I moved on.

It was harder than anything I'd ever experienced
In my entire life

And even though I no longer wanted to,
I scratched through the layers,
Bloodying my nails
For the only thing left
The only thing I could do.

Live.

And there was collateral beauty,
After all of it.
The red lines
Became fissures in the earth:
Artesian wells
That fed watercolor irises
And grew oil paint gardens.

After all of it
After dragging myself through all of it
I found a peace in me

I'd never felt before

A peace like

Ducks in Central Park in the winter,

And catchers in rye fields

I was caught,

I was saved.

by

me.

So,

I lived.

“Determination’s Perfect Partner”

Nina Lu

City High-Middle School

Honorable Mention

Leisure is not the enemy of boundless determination. It is determination’s perfect partner. Grit, at its essential definition, is the combination of passion for a long-term goal, combined with the perseverance necessary to achieve that goal. The culmination of organisms within a system utilizing grit benefits the system as a whole; for humans, achievements of art and culture from such passion and perseverance improve the quality of life for a society. However, a lively system must always remain in equilibrium, and the balance of grit and respite within a society is no exception.

Determination is not the enemy of sacrifice. The first time my parents saw an American flag, it was dripping with loss. Every morning for the last twelve years, I have watched my mother get ready for work every morning and spend her days earning a pay wholly unreflective of her skills. Every night, I have watched her study, both towards a degree and towards a more comfortable grasp of English, determined to avoid another confrontation with the uncomfortable words “I can’t understand you”. Every morning, I have walked into school with determination to honor the deep love that stains my mother’s heart and hands as she works endlessly to pursue the American dream. From the tiredness in her eyes, yet strength in her bones, I have found grit within the Chinese-American community. Thus, in my life grit has become an inescapable means through which honest, respectable work is created, and through which self-growth is achieved. It has shaped my outlook on academia, relationships, and surprisingly, my ability to embrace failure.

Failure is not the enemy. Grit pushes us to look towards the future and embrace current discomfort, which is necessary to value a goal when it is achieved. However, placing a heavy weight on those future achievements is perilous when grit is the only mindset we have. The outcomes of even our most intense labors are not always guaranteed, and the potential failure to reach long-term goals can be crushing when grit is strongly associated with success. This is evident within the struggles of Chinese-American youth to reach the expectations of their parents. Often, this is illustrated in the underlying pressure for the sons and daughters of immigrants to achieve a high degree of financial success. The path to such success is traditionally through achievement in academia, from knowing the answers on a test to getting into a top-tier college. This path is critically established in the idea of grit, where determination in academics would theoretically guarantee success and happiness for a child, and thus the

success of an immigrant's journey. Consequently, when I have encountered the bitter taste of failure, in academics or relationships, I have often sunk into the criticisms of my culture: questioning my intelligence or reprimanding myself for not being determined enough. Perhaps I could have sacrificed more, studied more, loved more, been more. However, it was only through failure to reach my personal goals that I learned to holistically view my circumstances; recognizing the privileges I hold as a young Chinese-American woman with the opportunity to chase any dream I so choose, due to the grit exemplified by my parents.

Additionally, my most valuable, exquisite experiences are hardly ever the time I spend staring at a computer screen or textbook. Rather, I have encountered my most breathtaking experiences in the periods of time spent farthest from such academic work. The time spent with the warm laughter of family and friends, crisp silence of the woods and bright red sounds of the Chinese culture- these experiences have contributed to my health and livelihood as critically as my academic determination. It is only because I have had the opportunity to embrace leisure, through which I see, feel and taste the world outside of a textbook, that I have the passion to contribute to a world I love, through my academic and artistic work. Likewise, my determination in such areas opens doors to the opportunities that enable me to experience the world. Thus, it is through the symbiotic nature of determination, failure and leisure, that grit is best utilized to achieve individual and societal goals. The Chinese-American community is a complex representation of the duality of grit, both as a catalyst for achievement and for personal growth through failure.

Leisure is not the enemy of boundless determination. It fosters the passion that drives perseverance.

Untitled
Ethan Magley
City High School
Honorable Mention

I grip the handle and push off with my legs. *Whoosh*. The seats in front of me slide in time with mine. Water splashes on my legs, but I hardly notice. My eyes are locked forward, though I cannot help but imagine the other boats passing us. As I begin to feel the soreness in my legs and arms, I hear the cry of my coxswain, and energy and adrenaline rush back into my body. Even though I feel tired, I continue, stroke after stroke, working not only for myself, but for my boatmates and the teammates that are screaming from the shore. The rhythmic snap of the oar handles becomes deafening as my teammates and I reach our physical and mental limit. Finally, I hear the honk of an air horn as the tip of our boat passes over the finish line. I can hear my whole boat breathing in unison, hard. We return to the dock, exhausted, and prepare for our next race.

In rowing, this is how every race feels. Sometimes we win the race. Often, we do not. But regardless of where the other boats are, regardless of the rough water we may face and the obstacles-- both physical and mental-- we must overcome, my teammates and I keep rowing. Still, you may be thinking that many sports require physical and mental resolve. So many people work hard and overcome obstacles, but my sport and my team are unique because of our connection. We are not uniform, we have our differences, but we are united in the common goal of being the best we can be. From this concept, we have found a determination that continues only because our teammates do. When I encourage my boatmate, it not only aids the other person, but that connection also energizes me. Because we have been through so much just to get to each race-- hours and hours of practice every week, traveling across the state-- we have a connection that would not be easily severed. This deep, personal bond that my team shares is unique to rowing, and results in a strong, collective determination that permeates through boundaries of gender, race, and cliques. Betty Ford said "You never know what you can do, until you have to do it," but I know that with our willpower and hard work, my team and I can achieve anything.

Even with our bond, my boatmates and I face challenges on the water all the time. From blisters, to waves and wind, to a mental block or barrier we must push through, the trials that we face in the boat often can seem insurmountable. However, our coaches, friends, and family support us. They encourage us after a rough piece, and stand on the shore, cheering for us as we race. The commitment I have made to my team and the sacrifices that my team has made to

go this far is the primary cause of the grit. It is the reason I stay in the boat. Every single time I take that first stroke in a race, my determination is tested, but with the collective determination and a deep bond with my team, the pressures of the race will never stop my boat from doing our best.

“My Grandfather: A Model of Determination”

Carter Meyer

Grand Rapids Christian High School

Honorable Mention

In the 1940s, my grandpa and his 9 siblings lived in a tiny 2-bedroom farmhouse in the Netherlands with their parents. They worked from sunrise to sunset doing chores on their farm. Life was hard for this large family and they were quite poor. They had a family friend who lived in Canada and told them how prosperous things were there and what great potential a family of twelve had on a Canadian farm. My great grandpa was sold on this idea and was planning on immigrating in the late 1930s, until World War II broke out. The Vanderveen family did fine in the beginning of the war since their own farm could sustain them all. However, during the war years, my great grandma got very sick, was bedridden for about two years, and then passed away in 1946 when she was only 47. After that, their house caught fire and burnt down, scattering the family to friends' and relatives' houses to live.

Finally, my great grandpa decided to send two of his sons to Canada to see if there was a better life waiting for them there. He sent my grandpa and his brother, Phil. Once the preparations were set, they boarded an old freight boat that moved immigrants and set sail for Halifax, Canada. Grandpa said that this boat trip was a nightmare; 90 percent of the people were seasick for the 10-day trip across the ocean. He said, “The further we got into the ocean, the more the boat rolled. Then a storm came that lasted 4 or 5 days. The boat rocked up and down and we had no relief.” He could not eat more than a few pieces of dry bread the entire journey. Once the boat arrived in Halifax, they were herded like cattle into a large warehouse where they were processed. They boarded an old immigrant train heading west towards Alberta. The train's passenger cars were old and dirty and the steam engine would pour black smoke into their cars. They were only allowed to bring \$100 into Canada and so they only ate bread and jam for the entire train trip.

After 4 days of exhausting travel, the train arrived at their destination in Cochrane, Alberta at midnight. The winter that year was brutal and the snow piled several feet high along the road. The temperatures were frigid and my grandpa and his brother did not have warm clothes. Eventually they were met by their family friend and brought to his house for the night. The next day, Phil was taken to another farm where he would work. My grandpa remembers thinking that day, “What have we done?” Here he was in a foreign, freezing cold land, separated from his entire family and friends, not understanding any English and being unable to communicate with anyone. He described his despair, “The thought came to me that this is

where we had to spend the rest of our life. We could never go back. It was such a desperate feeling, I could have screamed.”

My grandpa performed strenuous, demanding chores on the farm where he lived and he struggled to work for the critical, strict farmer he lived with. When my grandpa’s father asked for a report on how Canada was and if he should bring the rest of the family, my grandpa admitted he lied and said it was great. He was afraid that if he told him the truth, that it was awful, they would never come and he would never see them again. Soon, the rest of his family immigrated as well. Grandpa said things improved after that. He quickly learned English and found a job as a mechanic in a town nearby. Grandpa later worked as a bus driver for Greyhound for over 25 years and then started a prosperous agriculture business until his retirement.

My grandpa’s journey to Canada exemplifies determination. The rest of his life also showed equal amounts of his tenacity and single-mindedness. He worked hard every day at his job. He was an amazing father and grandfather. He passed on his faith to his family and never wavered in his beliefs and Christian values. He was determined to make a better life for his family and to serve his Lord, and I would say, he succeeded admirably. I hope that my life would have a fraction of the determination that my grandpa displayed.

Untitled
Kandace Pewee
Grand Rapids Christian High School
Honorable Mention

Police sirens, shattered plates, bruises and bleeding are all things that became as regular as getting up at 6:30 AM, brushing my teeth, throwing on an outfit, and then getting on a bus to arrive at school by 8:00 am sharp. Throughout my childhood, receiving the end of my brother's domestic abuse became routine and made finding the self-motivation I needed to succeed nearly impossible.

My brother's actions eroded at the once powerful chains that held our family together. Something simple as my mom telling him to wash his dishes would somehow shape into shouting matches and loud thuds against the wall. For a while I tried to bring myself to hate him but I couldn't. In African culture, family is a strongly emphasized value; you never neglect or reject one another. Engraved in my heart were the golden memories of our nerf gun wars, home-made short films, and our humid summer night runs that I couldn't seem to shake.

There were also numerous unshaken memories that were double-edged and difficult to determine whether they were good or bad. I remember one night all six of us kids piled into our family van to go get our well-child check-up. Conflict broke out and things escalated out of control; everyone was yelling and my brother forced his palms around my sister's neck, constricting her supply of air.

My whole world was spinning around me.

In that moment all I could envision was a possibility of entering this appointment with one less sibling. I wasted no time deliberating. I pulled on the back of his hoodie, causing him to lose his hold on my sister. Pure hatred pierced my brother's eyes as he broke from my grip, and smacked me onto the ground. Everything that happened for the rest of that car ride was blurred from my mind as hot tears boiled from eyes, onto my cheeks.

Suddenly my brother was shaking me, wrapping me up in his arms, and apologizing to me as though his life depended on it. He claimed he loved me and promised he would change, and in that moment, I simply didn't know how to feel. These kinds of situations would leave me conflicted and act as an emotional weight that seemed to follow me everywhere, including school. Laughing, smiling, and even talking were all difficult. Feeling ashamed of my egregious home-life, in which I was powerless, was extremely exasperating.

I soon realized that I had two options: I could persevere and become stronger or I could let life overcome me and fall apart. I refused to do the latter. Although I still had a myriad of

mess to sort through within myself, I craved happiness and knew for certain that I had some purpose. This led me to try nearly every extracurricular at school. My schedule consisted of practices for honors choir, spelling bees, and even volleyball throughout the year. But despite all my extracurriculars, nothing impacted me as profoundly as theater. My freshman year, I was cast as Crystal, in my school's production of *Little Shop of Horrors*. For the next few months, I spent hours rehearsing lines, music, and choreography. Crystal's character was whimsical, unapologetic, and jubilant; when I became her at rehearsals, it became an escape from my insecurities and crazy home life. My focus was now on using my creativity to compose a new reality, even if it only existed for a two-hour performance and for once I felt genuinely happy. A spark was ignited in me and I started making more friendships, receiving better grades, and most importantly loving myself.

The animosity of my upbringing that burned within, had galvanized me to access the determination I needed to choose to live life. This adversity also taught me that external factors in life should never be the reason you give up on yourself. I realize now that determination isn't having everything in life going right but rather having everything going wrong and *still* looking to do right for yourself and others. Although my home situation was dreadful, I realized that from doing theater I could channel that pain into something beautiful. This has made me feel determined to continue making similar impacts. In the future I hope to pursue a career in the arts and inspire those who don't feel empowered because when I think of being determined, I think of the continuous choice of strength and the reliance solely on myself to create my own future and happiness.

“Finish Lines”

Melanie Tenelshof

Plymouth Christian High School

Honorable Mention

There's one reason that I'd be up at dawn on a school morning after getting to bed late the night before, instead of sleeping; one reason that I'd be outside when it's 20* and snowing, so cold I can hardly breathe, at strange hours of the day.

It's to run.

But actually, it's surprising that I became a runner. In elementary, I avoided it, because I wasn't good at it. But by the end of sixth grade, something had clicked. I started running on the track with my friends at recess, barefoot, the sun on my face and my ponytail flying behind me. Every day we'd be out there, running lap after lap while the other kids played their games. I loved being there with my friends, but also... just to be running.

Field Day in fifth grade was what motivated me to start. Out of all the events, one that I signed up for was the “Long Run”. It wasn't very long, but too long for out-of-shape me. I was three quarters of the way, and suddenly I couldn't breathe, so I just stopped. I felt sick and my legs hurt terribly, so I couldn't finish. I was so embarrassed because everyone was asking what was wrong, but there really was nothing wrong, except that I had failed to finish something that had seemed so easy. I had let myself down.

But then I realized that there was a way to lift myself back up.

I began running, extremely slowly at first, at the track and at home. People asked me why I was running; there was no answer besides that I was trying to prove to everyone, but mostly to myself, that I could make it to the finish line.

It typically takes a lot of time and persistence to gain ground in running, and for me it was no different. Although we have a trail near our house, I was not allowed to run on it by myself, so I had to blaze new routes through our suburban neighborhood. Up and down the streets I ran, slowly jogging day after day. Sometimes it was difficult to determine if I was making headway, but I realized that fast takes time. Whipped and winded, I would ask myself why I was doing this, but I couldn't give myself another failure.

So I kept running.

On the especially rough days, there's something else that motivates me. I just have to remember my gift of a healthy body that can run, a blessing some people don't have. My inspiration is Kayla Montgomery, a runner who was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis at age 14, the same age that I am right now. Not many people could push themselves past such a

devastating disease, and go on to be one of the fastest runners in their state, or would get back up after falling on their face during the last track meet of high school and still win first place.

Kayla could've accepted her diagnosis and spent the rest of her life on the sidelines. I could've accepted my failure at finishing the race as a sign that I was not meant to be a runner. That would have been the easy way to go.

However, Kayla was determined to compete. When things get tough, Kayla inspires me to persevere, and not take the easy route, but put in the effort to succeed. I've been slowly improving over the years I've been running with patience, perseverance, and sweat.

Life is incredibly busy now, so I have the added challenge of fitting running into my schedule, but I'm determined not to give up.

There are discouraging days, days when I'm tired and I really don't feel like it. But I'm always rewarded after running, whether I beat my best time, or simply just because it feels good, my feet and my arms rhythmically pumping out my pace.

I can't stop running yet, because I have goals that I need to reach, finish lines to cross.

Kayla inspired me to overcome myself, and define new boundaries of possible. And most of all, to never hold back, because "You never know what you can do, until you have to do it." First Lady Betty Ford.

I'll probably never be the fastest runner, but every time I run, it's a victory over myself, and I prove a little bit more that I have what it takes to make it across the finish line.

“River of Determination”

Sabra Wolven

Newaygo High School

Honorable Mention

Flow through me like a river.

Let the venom sting, poison running through my veins.

Let the elixir cure, take the dark and make it light.

There will be no pushing past the words

We're too scared to say.

Perhaps, however, we can push through,

And come out safe on the other side.

Flow through me like a river.

The moonlight glistens on the water's surface,

But sheds little light on the monsters underneath.

The night grows darker.

The monsters grow larger.

But the darkest nights wake to the brightest mornings.

You just have to make it through the night.

Flow through me like a river.

No matter how the waves rock this ship,

I am determined to keep this wood together.

I am determined to wake up every morning,

And I will put up this white sail,

But never will I raise that white flag.

Never will I raise that white flag,

In hopes it could be better.

It could be better here,

But that flag wouldn't let me know.

Flow through me like a river.
Run hot like the flames down below.
I will grit my teeth and walk through the fire,
For them if not for myself.

My waves will rip their ships apart,
If I let the flames consume me.

If you walk through those flames,
And hold on until tomorrow,
You can dance in the rain again.

So put up that white sail.
Just please never raise that white flag.

Flow through me like a river.
Don't let the war destroy you.
Be determined to make it out alive,
For all these gunshots will make you stronger.

But click, click, BOOM!
And it's fatal.
He didn't have the strength to stand.

Or did he lack a reason?

His camouflage was torn,
Stained red from defeat.

Two people lie on that battlefield,
And one would not get up.

His friend will walk home on broken legs,
To a wife and a child of five.
His daughter will cry out, "daddy!"

He was determined to never raise that white flag.

He was determined to see that beautiful woman,
To see that wonderful child.

He was determined to see tomorrow,
And for him,
Tomorrow did come.

The other man lay broken,
Blown apart by bombs of emotion.
His ship was flooded by monsters,
Because he was too tired to fight.

Or did he lack a reason?

There was no woman waiting,
And no child he could hold,
He was alone in the world.
And for him the war was different.

His friend tried,
But he couldn't save the man.
Some bullet holes you just can't see.

The man was determined not to see tomorrow,
And for him,
Tomorrow never did come.

Determined enough,
And you will do what you set out to do,
For better,
Or for worse.

Flow through me like a river,
Turn this rushing waterfall
Into a peaceful stream.

Then turn it back.

Did that soldier coming home,
Know what killed his friend?
Did he realize the bullet holes,
Punctured a skin his friend never wanted to wear?

Does anyone see how these bullet holes,
Are puncturing a skin,
That / never wanted to wear?

But I will see tomorrow.
I will raise that sail,
And set that white flag aside.

I'll change my skin,
Into something I can wear.
Into something new,
Without any bullet holes.

Though I fear if I turn,
So quick from pink to blue,
The bullet holes will pierce,
Right through my heart.

If I swore that I,
Have been fighting my own monsters,
Would you see them too?

We are all sailing,
Upon this mighty sea.
This river turns to an ocean,
And threatens to drown us all.

Flow through me like a river.

And the waves do rock my boat.

But I am determined to keep this wood together.

So let it flow through you like a river.

You can't avoid the truth.

The waves will rock your boat,

Always.

But will you keep this wood together?