

High School Essay
Third Place

On a Cold Winter Morning
By Julian Drumwright, Northwood High School

On a cold winter morning in 2014, I awoke to sounds of bustling. I staggered out of bed shivering and began putting on layers and layers of clothes that were so cold they pulled the heat out of my skin. The sun was not yet out, but the house was wide awake. Panic thickened the air. This was the morning that my sister awoke in a haze. The night before, she had swallowed over 250 tablets of ibuprofen.

I would be lying if I said that we didn't see this coming. I remember standing in the cool night air outside the hospital after my sister cut herself for the first time. I remember my mother finding a bloody razor in my sister's room while we were on vacation in New York. I remember seeing her lying on the couch in the fetal position, her hoarse voice reverberating throughout the house, carrying the words "I want to kill myself." I remember everything being tainted by a sense of apprehension. An image of her hanging from the ceiling haunted my thoughts and my dreams. We saw it coming, yet we were powerless to stop it.

At school I told my friends, "Something happened that involved my sister, an ambulance, and 250 tablets of ibuprofen." Summarizing what had happened with an indirect statement made it feel less real. I spread this misguided attempt at a witticism far and wide. I told people who asked and I told people who didn't ask. I told my friends and I told my teachers. As I distanced myself more and more from my suffering, I felt empty. And I decided that this absence of feeling was, in fact, strength: that pushing my emotions out of view was the thing to do.

Watching my sister recover over the following months and being with her in hospital wards, in mental health wards, and at a mental health center all the way in Chicago reminded me of the importance of emotional availability. I realized that I could not go on shutting myself away from feelings of sorrow.

I think back on that morning that lasted minutes and felt like years, and the subsequent years that felt like minutes, often. I wonder if I could magically undo all of the suffering that I've been through, all of the suffering that my family went through—racing against the clock to save my sister, who, at the time, did not want to be saved—would I? I think no, because that period of anger, of frustration, and of fear brought forth a period of personal growth. I try every day to be a better person, one who is resilient yet not overly stoic. As the temperatures decrease and the winter of 2018 approaches, I think back on that cold morning and those months often. I think about them because I know that without them, I would not be striving to be my best self with the same dedication or determination.