SPECIAL RETROSPECTIVE ISSUE

THE BURR

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NARRATIVE NONFICTION COLLECTION

VOLUME 1 (2011-2013)

Seven stories that shaped Kent State’s student-produced, general-interest magazine.
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FORWARD

For nearly three decades, Kent State University students have made The Burr a showcase of their skills and talents. This independent, entirely student-run magazine reflects the time, culture and politics, as well as the passions and preoccupations, of the students who have filled its pages.

As the faculty adviser from 2011 through Spring 2013, I am pleased with the pieces the editors have chosen for this collection. Some are essays about deeply personal experiences. Others are articles about people and issues that deeply affected Kent State students. These stories are all inspired, moving and connective. They are to Kent students what literature was to F. Scott Fitzgerald: “That is part of the beauty of all literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you’re not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong.”

I am glad The Burr belongs to Kent State.

Jacqueline Marino
Associate professor and former Burr adviser
IN AN INSTANT

How former Kent State basketball star Malika Willoughby lost everything

BY JOEY POMPIGNANO (CLASS OF 2011)
SPRING 2011 ISSUE

NATIONAL FINALIST, Nonfiction Magazine Article
Society of Professional Journalists, Mark of Excellence Award

SECOND PLACE, Investigation and Analysis
Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication

FIRST PLACE, Nonfiction Magazine Article
Society of Professional Journalists, Region 4

In the surveillance tape, two women in a black BMW pull up to a Popeyes restaurant in Milwaukee around 10 p.m. on September 15, 2010. They begin arguing, which escalates to pushing and slapping each other. More pushing and slapping. This continues for a few minutes before the passenger grabs a Beretta .380, gets out of the vehicle and walks around the back of the car to the driver's side. She points the semi-automatic handgun at the driver and fires at her face. The shooter drags the woman out of the car onto the pavement, walks away, then walks back and kneels on the ground beside her in a please-wake-up panic. But it was too late — for both women.

Rosalind Ross, 30, was pronounced dead at the scene. And with the police station just a few blocks away, it didn't take long for law enforcement to arrest 27-year-old Malika Willoughby on one charge of first-degree intentional homicide.

Malika was one of the greatest basketball players to ever play for Kent State. Rosalind was a former WNBA player. Both were well known in their hometown of Milwaukee. They were also lovers for 14 years. Their promising futures ended abruptly, leaving a community wondering why this happened.

Basketball Roots

Rosalind was 16 when she met 13-year-old Malika through playing AAU summer basketball. Both went on to have successful, even legendary, high school and college basketball careers.

Malika lettered in basketball all four years at Milwaukee’s Washington High School. Her All-City Conference and All-State selection earned her an athletic scholarship to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The 5’8” point guard transferred to Kent State University in 2003.

As a sophomore at Kent State, Malika’s 194 assists ranked ninth in the nation (second all-time at KSU). She ranked 19th in the nation in steals her senior year with the Flashes. Her 2.9 steals per game average led to her becoming the 2006 MAC Defensive Player of the Year, as well as Kent State’s female athlete of the year at the 30th Annual Black United Students Ebony Achievement Awards.

It was Rosalind, though, who furthered a career in basketball at the professional level.

After graduating from Milwaukee Technical and Trade High School in 1998, Rosalind attended Northeastern Oklahoma A&M for a year before transferring to the University of Oklahoma. The 5’9” guard helped lead the Sooners to the Final Four of the NCAA women’s tournament. They made it to the 2002 championship game, losing to the UCONN Huskies 82-70.

The WNBA’s Los Angeles Sparks drafted Rosalind in the first round with the 16th overall pick, knowing that she might not be healthy enough to play because of lingering knee injuries that stemmed from her days at Milwaukee Tech.

Bradley Technical High School, which replaced Milwaukee Tech, has a brand new gym that Rosalind never had a chance to play on because the school was not yet built during her high school tenure. The old gym at Milwaukee Tech, her brother Spencer, 28, says, was “dumpy” and “deteriorating.” When Rosalind spoke about Bradley Tech’s gym, “She would say, ‘If I had this gym, I wouldn’t have bad knees right now,’” Spencer says.

When Rosalind’s injuries were finished healing, she and Nikki Teasley were supposed to be the most dominant backcourt duo in the WNBA.
The Sparks were a winning team, but Rosalind never healed. Her professional career ended after a year and a half because of her chronic knee problems.

**Teenage love**

Growing up as a lesbian in the ’90s was difficult for both girls since homosexuality was not as accepted in society as it is today. But despite that, their teenage love continued into their 20s.

Pamela Collins, Rosalind's mother, supported her daughter's sexual orientation because she taught her children to be comfortable with themselves as individuals. Willie Collins, Rosalind’s father, did not approve of his daughter’s homosexuality at first, and his unwillingness to accept her being a lesbian brought tension to the household. Willie recalls a scene outside his family’s home on 21st and Center Street:

“I look out the window and I see my son jumping rope, and my daughter playing basketball,” Willie says. “I said, ‘What is going on here?’”

After Rosalind told her parents she was a lesbian, Spencer got the courage to admit that he was also gay. Willie thought Spencer’s announcement was influenced by Rosalind. With both Rosalind and Spencer being openly gay, Spencer says he and his sister would joke with their brother Kenneth Collins, 19, about being the “last hope” for their mother to have grandchildren.

Willie and Pamela say they believed that similar issues were being dealt with in the Harp household (Malika’s parents). Pamela says that she and Malika's mother, Rebecca Harp, spoke as little as possible in the 14 years their daughters were in an on-again off-again relationship with each other. Rebecca Harp did not wish to comment for this story.

What made the death of Rosalind even more tragic for Spencer was that he also considered Malika a friend. In fact, the three of them were a close-knit trio. He and Rosalind once drove to Kent State to watch Malika play a basketball game, and he traveled with Malika to see Rosalind play for the University of Oklahoma. Spencer says he remembers conversations regarding his sister’s relationship with Malika between Malika and her mother. “[Malika] would say, ‘I’m not gay, I just love Rosalind,’” Spencer says.

**Remembering Rosalind**

January 17, Rosalind would have been 31 years old. The family went to her gravesite to sing “Happy Birthday” and release helium balloons. Spencer made a miniature snowman next to her stone, and cried with relatives and friends. He says he often stresses over different scenarios that may have prevented the incident.

“I talked with her on the phone about an hour prior to her death,” Spencer says. “She called me up and asked if I wanted any chicken because she and Malika were going to stop and get some food.”

He says he regrets not meeting up with her that night, or not talking on the phone with her a while longer.

Spencer shared a special bond with his sister. They would quote Angela Bassett lines from their favorite film, “What’s Love Got to Do with It,” and fake-smack each other in a playful manner. He went to all of his sister’s basketball games, and has her scoring and rebound statistics memorized. Rosalind taught him how to be ambidextrous after he broke his right wrist. She would miss her own recreation-league games and go watch his basketball games, to see if his left-hand shooting improved.

Rosalind had plans for her brother. “Roz would call me up and ask for tips about teams they were getting ready to play,” Spencer says. “She’d say, ‘We’ve got Texas Tech coming up. What are they like?’ Then he’d go study tape and give her the run-down of opponents’ half-court offenses and defensive sets. “I didn't realize it at the time, but she was preparing me to become a coach,” he says. Though Spencer says he didn't have any credentials to be a coach, Rosalind trained him to be ready when he got called on to do so. He became an assistant coach at Tech High School, and then the freshman team's head coach.

After graduating from Kent State with a marketing degree in 2006, Malika got hired as a bank manager in Milwaukee. She bought a home for her and Rosalind to live in together.

But financial support was not enough to keep their relationship going.

According to Spencer, Rosalind was seeing two other women. The Collins family says Malika offered to birth a child for Rosalind, and asked Spencer to be the donor. But the Collins family says that although Rosalind loved children, she didn’t want any. “My sister should have stopped using Malika for her money, and Malika should have left the relationship knowing that Rosalind was openly unfaithful,” Spencer says.

During a basketball game Rosalind was refereeing, an angry fan spit on Rosalind over a call he disagreed with. After that confrontation, Malika bought a gun for Rosalind’s safety. Spencer did not like the idea of Malika purchasing a gun for Rosalind. “I said, ‘[Guns] don’t harm the people they’re supposed to harm, or do what they’re supposed to do,’” Spencer says.

“[GUNS] DON’T HARM THE PEOPLE THEY’RE SUPPOSED TO HARM, OR DO WHAT THEY’RE SUPPOSED TO DO.”

Spencer Ross
The same gun Malika bought with the purpose of protecting Rosalind was the same gun that was used to kill Rosalind.

**Facing Consequences**

Belinda Huddleston, 32, is one of two women besides Malika who Rosalind was seeing. She says she remembers spending the entire day with Rosalind the day of her death. They talked about their future together and moving to Oklahoma. “[Rosalind] said, ‘I don’t even want to stay at Malika’s house anymore until I leave,’” Belinda says.

That night, while driving Malika’s BMW with Malika in the passenger seat, Rosalind received a phone call from Belinda when at the Popeye’s restaurant drive-thru. The two kept their conversation brief, confirming that they would meet up in 30 minutes. Rosalind then hung up the phone—for the last time.

February 28 was supposed to be the final pre-trial hearing. Silence permeated the hallways on the sixth floor of the Milwaukee County Courthouse Safety Building and into the courtroom. Ten close relatives of Rosalind attended the hearing to find out what the defense team has planned.

When Malika was first held in police custody, she pleaded not guilty to first-degree intentional homicide because she said she thought she took the magazine out of the gun upon pulling the trigger, according to court documents. The state of Wisconsin does not impose the death penalty. If Malika is found guilty of first-degree intentional homicide, the maximum sentence is life in prison.

In the courtroom Defense Attorney Michael Hart told Judge Dennis R. Cimpl that the defense team hired a ballistics expert to examine the gun. Cimpl granted a postponement and rescheduled the pre-trial hearing to March 11. The hearing was rescheduled for April 5, with the jury trial set for April 25. Hart did not respond to phone calls seeking comment.

The defense will probably argue that the gun went off accidentally due to a hair trigger, Prosecutor Mark Williams says. He says “the jury is going to get a number of charges that they can find Willoughby guilty of, and the defense will probably argue for one of the lesser charges.” He says that if that charge gets lessened to reckless homicide, the sentence is up to 60 years.

There’s a good chance the defense will ask Huddleston to testify in this case. Her phone call is the root of what the defense will argue caused Malika to react “reckless.”

“The relationship was a triangle that became a trust issue with three of us and Rosalind in the middle,” Huddleston says.

But Huddleston says Rosalind was excited about starting a “new” and “fresh” beginning. And Belinda says she was looking forward to sharing that new life with her.

**Looking Ahead**

Framed family portraits and pictures of Rosalind in a number 33 Sooners jersey decorate the living room walls of Pamela’s home. Staring at the photos, Pamela looks like she’s waiting to hear Rosalind let out one of her “ugly” and “squeaky” laughs she misses so much. She shows pride in her daughter’s awards, displaying a glass case with trophies and plaques. Posthumous tribute items from charity fundraiser events symbolize the community’s outreach to raise money for Rosalind’s funeral service and other expenses.

It has been several months since Rosalind’s death, but the broken sleep patterns persist for the 50 year old. She describes her intuition she had just days prior to her daughter’s death.

“I said, ‘Rosalind, you can come home. If something ain’t right, you can come home,’” Pamela says. “I went to sleep and saw her as clear as day in my dream in a casket with the outfit she was buried in.”

Pamela says Rosalind was leaving Milwaukee to work as a recruiting scout at her alma mater, University of Oklahoma but that she had no intentions of bringing Malika along with her. Fourteen years of dating on and off made it difficult for either of them to walk away from the relationship.

While Pamela turned to her Apostolic faith when seeking answers through prayer from God, her husband Willie, 52, handled his emotions in a different way.

“I cursed,” Willie says. “I drank and I cursed, and I drank some more.” He can’t find it in his heart to ever forgive Malika, and says she deserves the maximum penalty for her actions.

“We have a life sentence, too, because we’ll never see our daughter again,” he says. “She killed my baby girl. Malika killed my baby girl.”

Malika’s fate is yet to be determined by a judge and a jury of her peers. Depending on whether homicide charges against her are intentional or reckless will unveil how much time she will serve if found guilty.

Rosalind will never get to recruit student athletes to the University of Oklahoma. She won’t get to see Spencer coach another basketball game. If Kenneth has children, they will never know their Aunt Rosalind. Pamela and Willie lost their daughter.

Basketball lost two icons.
FAILURE TO DIAGNOSE

One student tries to hold herself together as a parade of doctors and nurses struggle to diagnose her crippling weeks-long migraine.

BY RACHEL CAMPBELL (CLASS OF 2014)
APRIL 2013 ISSUE
SECOND PLACE, First-Person
Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication

One hour passed, then a second and my worry increased. I feared the worst. Why was it taking so long? Did they find a tumor? Were they trying to figure out how to break the bad news? Was I going to die? These thoughts raced through my head as I stared at the TV and my mom read Walter Isaacson's biography of Steve Jobs that I bought her for Christmas. It was more like she was staring at the pages, because they rarely seemed to turn.

All of this was triggered by the most intense headache I have ever experienced. I say headache, not headaches, because it wasn’t a light switch relationship, you know, a period of on-again off-again. It was more than a month of one constant headache. I was furniture shopping with my mom near the end of July 2012 when it hit like an internal ton of bricks to my frontal lobe. It felt like someone was stretching the skin of my forehead as tight as possible while pounding my temples and the front of my skull all at once.

Furniture shopping was followed by my mom choosing the loudest, most irritating restaurant for dinner, or at least it felt that way. The room was dark, having only one dim light suspended above each table, but I felt like I was staring into the sun for two hours. My mind latched onto every sound around me. That lady five tables away? Her laugh was shrieking; it pierced my eardrums with every breath. The man behind us? His whole life story rang through my head. That fork the toddler dropped? It exploded like a bomb as it hit the ground.

I sat waiting for a verdict as to what might be causing my unbearable pain. My mom got up to use the restroom and I thought to myself, ‘This is when they’re going to call me back into that private waiting room. I’m going to have to face the bad news alone.’

And I was right, sort of.

I was called up to the reception desk in the midst of Wheeling Hospital, but not for the bad news I expected. My pediatrician was unavailable yet again. They had been trying to reach her for the past two hours to review the MRI scans before I was either released or checked into the hospital if something was wrong. Because my pediatrician couldn’t be reached, they called another one who cleared me to go home for the time being because my scans appeared to be normal.

A conversation with my own pediatrician the morning after my MRI led to making an appointment with a notable neurologist. I say notable because this woman was so booked I couldn’t get in to see her until August 10, more than one week away.

The neurologist is an osteopath, which means she observes the body as a whole to determine the root of the problem rather than just examining the area of concern. I began with her in a gynecologist’s office in Wheeling Hospital. She held office hours there for
women in a waiting room filled with baby photos and parenting magazines on the second Friday of every month.

I didn’t know why this was, but I didn’t care; I just wanted to know why my head was still throbbing. It was now day 16 of the never-ending headache.

After an hour or so, we were called back into an examination room. The “what’s wrong with me” spiel was given like it’d been rehearsed, while there was poking and prodding of my vitals. She asked what other doctors had been saying, and we went through everything including that I was told to stop caffeine consumption entirely. She nearly fell off of her stool when she heard this.

“Are your headaches better or worse since you stopped drinking caffeine?” she asked.

“They’re about the same if not a tad worse,” I said.

She laughed in an “I thought so” tone.

“Caffeine is a drug,” she said. “You need to wean yourself off of it. Going cold turkey is likely to cause headaches, and the fact that you already had them, and they made you do that is ridiculous.”

Bottom line: I was allowed to drink coffee again. For someone who drinks at least two cups per day, this was quite the relief, but still not the relief I was looking for.

One thing the neurologist did that the others didn’t was check my eyes. In addition to the head and neck pain, I had the inability to stop myself from blinking constantly. It was like there was dust in my eyes, and I couldn’t get it out. I told the doctor I believed it was my subconscious effort to relieve the tension above my sockets. If I blinked, it stopped hurting...even if it was only a respite, I needed it.

The neurologist pulled out that cone-shaped flashlight eye doctors use. She turned it on and I winced. She apologized, not in that doctor’s way where they just want you to stop moving so they can get it over with, but sincerely. She had that motherly aura, which made her likable. This was especially necessary in a time when I was doing my best to not outwardly freak out.

She did the examination in spurts, shining the light and then taking a break in order to do the best she could to not exacerbate the headache. She held her finger off to the side and told me to focus on it without moving my head, but I couldn’t. My eyes began rapidly shaking and it hurt to focus. She sighed so deeply in response I thought it was a subconscious accident.

“I’m worried about your eyes,” she said. “The eyes make me think that it is something else entirely.”

And then she said it: the one thing I feared most.

“It’s making me think it could be a pseudo tumor.”

Tumor. It rang through my head and made my stomach hit the floor. I started crying. Not sob-crying, but the kind you don’t want anyone to see.

Pseudotumor cerebri. She explained that it was a “fake brain tumor” that is caused by high pressure in the skull, usually due to spinal fluid buildup. She believed that the pressure in my brain was causing my blinking and inability to focus my eyes. She also believed I needed a spinal tap, or lumbar puncture. My vision blurred and my nose ran as I tried my best not to make those choking on air noises, but it was useless. My mom grabbed my hand and the neurologist scooted closer. She looked me in the eyes, and told me that it would help. Even if they did the lumbar puncture and discovered that the pressure was normal, the procedure relieves any slight pressure and would likely reduce the pain of the headaches.
I was sent to another wing of the hospital to yet another waiting room. After the initial sign-in, I was sent to a cubicle for more paperwork and insurance checks with a noisy printer that barely worked. A chipper old woman at the desk sent us to a different waiting room where we were then called into another cubicle behind the swinging hospital doors. After that, we were placed in yet another private waiting room with a static-filled TV.

I sent a text to my new boyfriend, back then not so much, that I'd be unreachable for a few hours. He had been nonexistent during the past few weeks, something I barely noticed but was still aware of. Out of spite, I sent something along the lines of 'I'm going to be unavailable for the next few hours. I have to get a spinal tap to make sure I don't have a tumor in case you cared.' As soon as I hit send, I was called back into the hospital to do more paperwork (shocker). I regretted the text as soon as I sent it. I thought about it on the walk through the wing. It was petty and immature, but I was scared. I had been keeping a brave face for my mom, which was something I knew how to do well since my father passed nine years prior. I didn't want to worry her, but I needed to tell someone.

When I was 11, I sat in the same waiting room I was currently awaiting treatment in. My dad lost his balance and hit the floor one morning before he was rushed into the ER. They discovered a blood clot between his heart and lungs that had to be broken up in order to save his life. Being a mere fifth grader, my mom didn't allow me back into the room to see my dad. My last image was him being rushed out of our home on a stretcher with an oxygen mask strapped to his face. My mom said it was better than seeing wires sticking out of him and doctors on top of him. Yes, on top of him. One small, statue doctor worked to break up the blood clot by straddling my father's chest in one last, failed effort to save his life. That doctor was now standing in front of me, ready to do my lumbar puncture.

As I had learned from WebMD while awaiting my procedure, the purpose of a lumbar puncture is to collect the cerebrospinal fluid that surrounds the brain and spinal cord. It is obtained by inserting a needle into the lower section of the spinal canal. The sample is then studied for color, blood cell counts, protein, glucose and other levels of things in a culture cup, and in my case, the pressure would also be measured.

My mom gasped when she realized who the radiologist was. He answered a few questions before grabbing a chair and leading her out into the hallway to wait for the procedure to be over. They kept talking outside while the technician sterilized my lower back. The radiologist re-entered, closing the door behind him. He positioned me so that I could see the screen that showed the live X-ray of my spine. He explained the process once more before finally beginning.

The needle was inserted, and the release of the fluid sent an intense sensation up my back. It was like the syringe was filled with liquid fire. Numerous doses were added as I burried my head in the pillow, trying not to cry. The technician had offered me her hand herself, and I let her. She talked to me, trying to make me laugh. It worked until the real needle was used. I could tell the difference based on the size. The first one was small, but the second felt like a stick being shoved through my back. I don't know if it was actually that big; the only things I could see were the X-ray of my spine and the face of the technician. I also don't know how much time passed, but it felt like years.

The procedure finished, and the radiologist sealed the spinal fluid for the lab to collect. I was rolled into the hallway on my stretcher with my mom’s chair at my feet. I was required to remain horizontal for an hour post-procedure to avoid any spinal headaches on top of my current one. I stared at the ceiling for the majority of the time as my mom continued pretending to read about Steve Jobs.

We finally exited the hospital after a good 8 hours of doctor-filled fun. I got outside and my phone buzzed numerous times: four texts, two missed calls and a voicemail.

The lumbar puncture caused so much pain I barely noticed that my headache started going away. My spine ached, and I feared bursting the insertion point and causing brain fluid to leak out. I literally walked around as if I was crippled for a solid two days, or rather one day, because the first day was spent solely in my bed.

I returned to the neurologist Aug. 13, three days after the lumbar puncture. She hugged me like she had done at our first appointment upon my departure, before launching into the breakdown of what it was.

Medical terms are tricky, and when you’re left with several options, it’s hard to keep them straight. My headaches were more or less gone, a relief the neurologist attributed to the lumbar puncture and medication she prescribed me at our first appointment. Regardless,

of nerdy reading glasses my eye doctor suggested I buy in case of the purpose of a lumbar puncture is to collect the cerebrospinal fluid for the lab to collect. I was rolled into the hallway on my stretcher with my mom’s chair at my feet. I was required to remain horizontal for an hour post-procedure to avoid any spinal headaches on top of my current one. I stared at the ceiling for the majority of

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she feared that whatever it was could come back and she, unfortunately, announced that the possible pseudo tumor had competition. She pulled a business card from her stack and wrote on it “Possible herpes encephalitis vs. pseudo tumor July 2012” and told me to put it in my wallet. So it was now a fake brain tumor versus herpes, but not the type we all learned about in health class.

Herpes viral encephalitis is an infection of the central nervous system. I stuck the card behind my Blue Cross Blue Shield insurance card. If anything would occur and I would need rushed to a hospital, the card is there for easy reference of my past medical history.

The neurologist continued to look through my file, and revealed that there had not been enough fluid to do all the tests. She was highly disappointed that the one for West Nile Virus was skipped in favor of less important ones she had marked. West Nile Virus was the one my mom self-prescribed to me after several web searches and evidence of mosquito bites obtained on vacation the week before the headaches began. The neurologist contemplated sending me for another lumbar puncture, but I refused. As far as I was concerned, the headaches were gone, or at least lessened, and I was feeling better despite the continuing back pain from the lumbar puncture. There was no need to increase the pain for the sake of adding to what could possibly be wrong with me.

Without a definitive diagnosis, I could only direct my frustration at the team of medics who failed me. Seven days worth of appointments with 10 doctors’ opinions, an ensemble of nurses and a needle through my spine, and all I have to show for it is a pair of nerdy reading glasses my eye doctor suggested I buy in case of a future headache.

Mystery migraine: 1; doctors: 0.
PUTTING THE PIECES BACK TOGETHER

I’ve never been a big believer in therapy. But after thirteen years of keeping quiet, my secret, a secret I never thought I’d have to reveal, was affecting too much in my life to be silenced any longer. I had to take a seat on the proverbial couch.

BY TAYLOR ROGERS (CLASS OF 2012)
SPRING 2012, ISSUE 1

I sat on a floral loveseat with my mom to my right. I was wringing my hands; scowling at the many self help books placed strategically around the room and the soft music streaming daintily through the speakers. I’m sure my mom could sense my discomfort, but she kept things light, promising me sushi the minute it was over.

I laughed her off and stewed in my skepticism, repeatedly telling myself: You don’t belong in therapy. You can figure this out alone. You’re fine.

I was so not fine.

“Taylor?” a voice asked.

I looked up to see a young blonde woman with a pretty face. She motioned for me to follow her up a narrow staircase. I gave my mom one last look of uncertainty and made my way.

This was my first visit with my therapist, and I was truly surprised at my being there. My family didn’t know why I had decided to either, but I knew I needed to go — I just didn’t want to.

It’s always been easiest for me to keep my past at an arm’s length.

My therapist was a small woman with a small office on the second floor. She offered me a spot on yet another floral loveseat. I sat down and once again began playing with my hands. I glanced to my right and spotted a box full of tissues. She couldn’t see it, but I was rolling my eyes. I could feel my walls quickly rising. I’d really never warmed to the idea of uninhibited feelings.

She took a seat across from me, made some small talk and then asked me why I was there.

“Something happened to me when I was little,” I said.

She looked at me curiously.

“A man molested me in a drug store,” I told her.

Her expression hardly changed, and I went on to tell her that I thought I might be having some, you know, adverse effects, even after 13 years.

She offered her apologies — something people often do (something that makes me cringe).

I could see I wasn’t the first to tell her something like this. And I certainly wasn’t the only one still wondering how to deal with it.

She told me how it would work. I’d come in, and we’d just talk. She’d use this first “session” as a way to calculate how often I should come back. I raised an eyebrow at that. I didn’t want to be plugged into a formula.

She then asked me to be more specific about what happened.

I was surprised at how quickly the words came to me.

I was seven years old. When he approached me, I was standing in an aisle, touching the loops of soft, shiny hair that represent the colors of boxed dye kits. My mom was just a few aisles away.

“Excuse me?” he said.

And I stepped aside, thinking I was in his way. He looked down at my shoes and complimented my feet.

In my child-like naivety, I smiled at him. Realizing I had bought it, he went on to tell me that he was a “foot doctor.” He asked if he could take a few pictures of my feet and pulled a disposable camera from his brown leather jacket.
I began to suspect something, but my mind was reeling. I sat down on the cold floor, and he snapped two or three pictures of my Looney Tunes Converse.

When I got up to leave, he stopped me.

Out of fear, the kind of crippling fear that erases all thoughts of what I could and should do, I listened to him as he told me to open my mouth.

He unzipped his pants, and I froze.

After what was probably only a few seconds but what felt like forever, I could hear my mom calling my name. The thought of her seeing what he was doing made me sick. I ran away from him and didn't say a word until we reached the car.

I was embarrassed, so I lied and told her he'd just said some strange things to me. No big deal — just a local creep.

I think she could tell I was bothered because she went back inside to see if he was still there.

He was gone.

My therapist nodded sympathetically when I wrapped up my story. She gave me her best “concerned face” (there’s a slight chance she was actually concerned, but I was just too cynical to notice) and granted me five or six sessions.

I gave her and myself the benefit of the doubt and came back. I almost immediately regretted it when she told me I would have to draw out what happened that night. She handed me some colored pencils and a sketchbook.

Maybe she could feel my uncertainty or maybe she just knew what to say next, but she reassured me. She said this was a way for me to understand that although it was a traumatic event, it was just one event of many in my life, and it was over.

I liked that idea, so I drew a few really awful, stick figure-esque sketches.

I had literally no idea how to draw out what happened without feeling incredibly vile, but I powered through.

We talked about each one. She sat the last drawing down and asked me how I felt. I honestly wasn't sure.

This was my last visit with her for about five months.

When I brought this up to my mom years later, she provides brutal, but accurate, insight into why I stopped going.

“A little bit of me thought maybe she was starting to hit closer to home and you weren’t ready to face that yet,” she said. “A little bit of me thought maybe you didn’t think it was useful.”

She was right on both counts.

I wasn’t ready to face it because I felt guilty, but I hadn’t always thought about it that way. In fact, I hadn’t thought about it at all until I was in my late teens, probably because I didn’t understand it.

That’s when I started to realize that what he made me do had a name, and it was something to be ashamed of.

When I did decide to return to therapy, I was a mess. My relationship of five years had ended just a few days before. I had tested Steven’s patience a million times too many, and I knew it. I had been withdrawing into my issues more and more. He had known about my past for a few years and had dealt with it more than admirably. But he said he was frustrated with the idea that he could get more attention from a girl he'd only known for a few hours. I said I understood.

How could I possibly ask him to stay with someone who felt queasy at the thought of being alone with him? Not because I wasn’t attracted to him — because I was and yet I didn’t know how to stop feeling cornered.

I was a little relieved when my therapist told me this was very common.

Years later, Steven and I discussed our issues, hoping to gain some insight into why we struggled so much with something that happened more than a decade ago.

“I WAS SURPRISED BY HER HONESTY WHEN ONE AFTERNOON, SHE TOLD ME I WOULD PROBABLY NEVER BE ENTIRELY COMFORTABLE WITH MEN.”

Taylor Rogers
In the middle of our conversation, Steven balled his hand into a fist and struggled to answer me. He told me how sick it made him to think someone could be so polluted.

“I hate that bastard,” he said.

I looked down nervously.

“This is uncomfortable for me too,” he whispered.

The awful break up wasn’t the sole reason I’d chosen to go back to therapy.

I explained to the woman sitting across from me that for 13 years, I had told my mom only part of what happened. Thinking I was to blame for giving in to the stranger, I just told her that he’d taken pictures of my feet and freaked me out a little in the process.

But a few days prior to my return, we had a conversation that would lead me back to the floral loveseat.

I was standing in the middle of our living room, explaining to her that Steven and I were spiraling into a routine of fights and tears. I was scared to be close to anyone, and I told her I thought it might have something to do with what happened years ago.

She didn’t understand.

“Is there something about that day that you’re not telling me?” she asked.

I looked down. I knew she’d be upset, but I told her the truth anyway. My guilt, which stemmed from a nagging feeling that I should’ve just walked away from him, couldn’t be silenced for a minute more.

Tears streamed down her face.

“I never should have left you,” she said.

Once I told her, I knew I’d have to go back to therapy. I had acknowledged my demons, and in doing so, I had released them. They were now untamed dragons, free to run around inside my head, breathing fire at the first sign of physical attraction — a constant reminder that I wasn’t wired to be comfortable with closeness.

My therapist went on to ask me questions about my family’s handling of the situation. I smiled, remembering my mom telling me that my two older brothers had sat outside the Drug Mart parking lot.

They, of course, never saw him, and the headlines showed that a man with his description had chased another woman into her car with a knife at a local supermarket. He had claimed he was a foot doctor.

My family made me feel safe, I told her. When the police pulled me out of my classroom one morning, my parents stood beside me.

The men in uniform held a large book full of mugshots, and I scanned the pages looking for his face, but I couldn’t remember it. All I could remember was his brown leather jacket and the smell of cigarettes.

My mom later admitted she and my dad were apprehensive about making me do this.

“I was worried that it would deepen your fear,” she said, “But I felt it was a necessary evil because I didn’t want it to happen to someone else.”

From what I know, the police never did catch him.

Steven and I did eventually get back together. After a few weeks without any communication, I decided I needed to be brutally honest with him about what I could handle and how I planned to move forward. As it turns out, that’s all he wanted.

I came back to my therapist again, and we continued to discuss how I thought that night was still affecting me. I explained to her that I thought I was excessively nervous in social situations, especially when men were involved. I would almost always carry a book with me, arming myself for the inevitable moment that I’d become uneasy.

She handed me some personality tests.

By this time, I was extremely frustrated — frustrated with her and frustrated with me. I didn’t want to take a test or to draw. I wasn’t seven anymore. I think what I wanted was a cure, plain and simple.

I continued to humor her. She looked over my answers and read back to me what I already knew: Your anxiety in social situations is severe. You prefer being alone. You fear intimacy.

Check, check and check.

But these tests seemed to give her a better grasp on what I needed, even if it didn’t do the same for me.

She assured me that my shy personality was not a disease that needed to be cured, although she knew I thought this was the case, but she said my nervousness was extreme. She suggested I try Lexapro, a drug used to treat depression and general anxiety disorder. This in and of itself gave me some insight. Maybe I was a little less fine than I had originally thought myself to be. She didn’t seem like the kind to shell out pills without cause.

I was on Lexapro for about ten months. I didn’t feel any dramatic changes as a result of the pill, or of the therapy. But I was surprised by her honesty when one afternoon, she told me I would probably never be entirely comfortable with men. However, I should want and be able to be close with one man — the one I’ll eventually spend the rest of my life with.

She also said while I did seem to have some excessive anxiety, many of my introverted tendencies (my love of being alone, my quiet nature and my fear of attention) were just part of my personality.

I should eventually embrace it, she urged.

For the first time, I left feeling comforted.

I did eventually stop going to therapy. I didn’t feel I needed to be one of those people with their therapist on speed dial, though sometimes I think differently. Life is, after all, a never-ending race, and I sometimes look back at the hurdles behind me and wonder how I ever made it through or why I didn’t just avoid them.

I have embraced at least some of what she said, but like most things in life, it’s a daily process.

Steven, however, feels differently.

“I know you said you weren’t a big believer,” he told me one evening, “But I think it did help you a little bit, maybe even more so than you thought.”

I hate to admit it, but he’s probably right.
WHO IS LESTER LEFTON?

Lester Lefton, the highly scrutinized, seemingly elusive president of Kent State University, is — contrary to popular belief — a very real human being. In 70 minutes of pure candor, he meets with The Burr to talk about his salary, his escape, his popularity (or, at times, lack thereof) and why he once quit college.

BY ANTHONY DOMINIC (CLASS OF 2013)
DECEMBER 2012 ISSUE

TOP 10 NATIONAL FINALIST, Personality Profile
Hearst Journalism Awards Program

Lester Lefton is looking back at me, laughing. We’re standing in his office on the second floor of the Kent State University Library, overlooking Risman Plaza, where hundreds of students are waiting in line for tickets to see President Barack Obama, who will be campaigning on campus in two days.

Lefton, 66, is taller and more robust than he appears in photos. He’s wearing a plaid, button-up shirt with navy slacks. A pair of thinly framed eyeglasses rest on the bridge of his nose, and a long, striped tie hangs from his collar.

A dozen photographs are sprawled across the conference table between us — his photos. Photography is Lefton’s 50-year, yet little-known passion, and he is ecstatic to speak of it. As we circle the table, the admitted “gear geek,” who launched a photography website in June, is telling me about his photographs (“artistic expressions,” he calls them) and his influences (Trey Ratcliff, Colby Brown and Henri Cartier-Bresson, to name a few). As he speaks, I look more closely, and I begin to see each photograph as a window into Lefton’s arcane world.

“Photography, for me, is not a representation of reality,” he says, in what’s left of his Boston accent. “I try and interpret the world as I see it, and often what you see and what I see is very different.”

Lefton’s photos are highly stylized. It’s called high dynamic range imaging — a technique based on the manipulation of colors and lighting in post production.

“There’s something mechanical to me about just shooting a landscape and having it reproduced perfectly,” he says. “This allows me to express the world the way I want to see it through my eyes.”

His skies aren’t blue; they’re lapis lazuli, alive and ocean-like. His grass isn’t green; it’s a seething sea of shamrock, lush and vibrant. Most of all, his photographic world isn’t reality. Reality is a faculty union, divided on a vote of no confidence. It’s a student body, convinced its president is disconnected and overpaid. It’s an all-consuming job to keep a $750 million institution afloat, despite constant criticism and shrinking state support.

I first met Lefton on a windy September afternoon in Twinsburg. It was the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Kent State University
Twinsburg Regional Academic Center — a mouthful for the impressive $24 million addition to the university’s ever-expanding purview. At the Board of Trustees’ meeting that followed, Lefton was euphoric — playing the roles of pitchman, comedian, cheerleader and consultant — as he outlined the main campus’ $146 million renovations project. More than anything, he made appeasing the board look just plain easy.

But the moment Lefton finished and returned to his seat, something changed. His shoulders slouched, his mouth tightened and his eyes sank. Everything about the man was different. As the meeting carried on, I watched as he shifted in his seat and fidgeted with his hands. He appeared uneasy, as if absorbed in some thought. (Or he was just absurdly bored.)

Having recently polled Kent State undergraduate students, I was reminded that many perceive Lefton as non-genuine, a well-rehearsed actor, motivated only by money. Well, is that what it had been? Just another performance? Was I a firsthand witness to the contrived dichotomy that is Lester Lefton?

After the meeting, Eric Mansfield, executive director of University Media Relations, led me through the high-profile crowd for the big moment. Lefton and I exchanged a firm handshake. I said it was good to finally meet, and I thanked him for agreeing to sit down and talk with me later that month.

“Yeah, well, that’s what I do,” he said bluntly. “Talk.”

Someone else caught Lefton’s attention, and a moment later he was being whisked away.

“I’ll see you in a few weeks, Anthony,” he said, turning back.

And that was it.

In that moment, I realized, despite my efforts, I may never learn who Lester Lefton really is.

But I will learn who he is not.

He’s not Holden Thorp — the soon-to-be former chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Thorp’s recent resignation, effective at the end of the 2012-2013 academic year, followed a series of controversies, including the alleged misuse of university funds, concerns about course quality and a NCAA investigation into the misconduct of university football players.

“Everybody said, ‘This guy’s a rock star!’ He’s like the Christ of presidents! He’s, like, unbelievable!” Lefton says of Thorp, as we return to our seats across the office. “[He] was considered a rock star, the ‘Madonna,’ who everyone thought was, like, the best president known to humankind because he was so in-touch with everyone.”

He pauses.

“Four years. Four years,” he repeats, referring to the length of Thorp’s chancellorship.

Lefton rattles off a long list of other short-lived public university presidents, including former University of Tulsa President Geoffrey Orsak, who was fired without reason after 74 days.

This is what keeps Lefton up at night, literally. This is why he tosses, turns and stares at the ceiling. This is why he has asked himself the same question every day for six years, while in the car, in the shower, on the elliptical. It’s the question he’s expected to solve. It’s the question he’s so highly compensated to solve: “What is right?”

“What is right for our students?” he expounds. “What’s right for Kent State? What’s right for Ohio? What’s right for America?”

Lefton says the answer “isn’t always what a 19-year-old journalism student might see because he doesn’t know what’s right.”

“For example,” he begins, “If I were to ask your average 19-year-old journalism student, ‘And what did [the College of] Podiatric Medicine bring to Kent State?’ They’d go, ‘That was a waste of time and money.’ And [the College of] Public Health? They just don’t understand. And there aren’t enough hours in the day for me to educate every student about every decision that I make.”

As Lefton speaks, it’s obvious he’s not acting; he’s opinionated and often curt in his delivery. I see why the Aldridge Group called him “prickly,” “thin-skinned” and not “overly warm” in his 2012 performance review. (This is the same firm that praised his strengths in “strategic thinking,” “persistence” and “leadership.”) As Lefton points out, the media often “reduce presidents to their salaries.” While I can conclude that few would put a $409,608 price tag on his personality, Lefton reminds me that he’s not evaluated for his per-
sonality; he’s evaluated for his effectiveness as president and CEO. And each year he has held those titles, he has been granted his full performance bonus by the Board, which was $102,402 this year.

“[My salary]’s got nothing to do with how well I do my job,” he says in regard to critics. “So, they would have liked me if I were only making $30,000 a year?”

If Lefton is overpaid, all public university presidents are overpaid—grossly. Gordon Gee, president of Ohio State University, has a base salary of $814,000; however, his bonuses and deferred compensation push his annual intake to nearly $2 million. But, as Lefton notes, in size, Ohio State (64,429 students at six campuses) is not twice as large as Kent State (42,513 students at eight campuses).

Lefton says the media coverage of his compensation can be a “wildly misleading cheap shot” and “doesn’t talk about what a president does or the results or quality of the institution.” He adds that an average student doesn’t have the basis for judging his performance because they are likely “really clueless” as to what he actually does.

Which, as it turns out, is fundraising. It’s why he was hired and why the trustees still love him. Since his appointment in 2006, Lefton has consistently demonstrated an uncanny ability to appeal to alumni, investors and the general public. In September he closed the two-year, $265 million Centennial Campaign, the largest fundraising initiative in Kent State’s history.

If Lefton were merely the well-rehearsed actor, what are the donors who contributed to the campaign? Fools? Lefton says the only reason his fundraising initiatives have been successful is because he’s not acting.

“I actually believe in what’s going on at Kent State, and I can speak about it for hours on end with passion and enthusiasm,” he says. “I’m the orchestra conductor. I don’t actually make the music, but if I do my job well, hopefully all the moving parts work better together and we get a better symphony. And I think that is, in fact, the case. And that is what the Board, in fact, thinks.”

While Lefton is not directly responsible for changes in tuition, curricula and contracts, issues in these key areas have contributed to his declining popularity among students and faculty. Under Kent State’s recent tuition hike, in-state undergraduates enrolled in 11 to 17 credit hours now pay $9,672 per academic year. This is a 3.5 percent increase, the largest allowed by state law. And students taking more than 17 credit hours must pay an additional overload fee of $440 per credit hour.

Frustrations over rising costs culminated with an April 12 student protest in Risman Plaza (right below Lefton’s office windows), where signs reading, KASICH AND LEFTON SITTING IN A TREE, and, NO CHILD LEFTON BEHIND, could be seen as the crowd chanted, “We are the 99 — Lefton is the 1 percent!” My most vivid memory: a flattened Cap’N Crunch box that read, I CAN’T EVEN AFFORD A REAL SIGN.

“There’s a saying,” Lefton says, clearing his throat. “Everyone who has gone to college thinks they know how to run a college. And the truth is they don’t. Your typical student only knows that I raise tuition. Well, the truth is I don’t raise tuition; the Board of Trustees raises tuition.”

He raises his arms.

“It’s very easy to say ‘No more tuition increases ever!’ It would make me very popular, right? I’d be king as we closed the doors of the nursing school.”

Lefton retorts that many of the students’ grievances are actually with the faculty, not the administration.

“The faculty determine requirements, what courses [students] should be taking, the rules to change majors,” Lefton argues. “The faculty decide [students] need 157 credits to get a chemistry degree, not the Board of Trustees or me.”

Many of these faculty members Lefton speaks of are still bitter after a long year on the job without a contract. The Board of Trustees only recently approved a new three-year deal for tenure-track faculty, entitling instructors to back pay and a 2 percent pay increase moving forward. In April, before a deal was reached, members of Kent State’s faculty union, a university-exclusive branch of the American Association of University Professors, proposed endorsing a petition of no confidence against Lefton. While the petition never led to a vote, and even a successful vote does not remove a president from office, it is a serious benchmark.

However, when given the opportunity to speak about Lefton, Paul Farrell and Thomas Janson, faculty senate chair and senator, respectively, did not return my phone calls. Even other phone calls regarding Lefton, including several to Kent entrepreneur Ron Burbick, went unreturned. Lefton has gone on record about himself; why won’t anyone else? The one place his critics can be consistently found: largely anonymous comment sections on KentWired.com.

I lean in closer to Lefton.

“Well, let me ask you this: Is it unfair to say you’re a bottom-line president?”

A smile spreads across his face.

“You say that in a pejorative way. I say it with some pride.”

Lefton leans forward. We’re nose-to-nose.

“What is a bottom-line president?” he asks.

“You’re here solely to fulfill duties set forth by the Board of Trustees — which hired you.”

The smile returns, wider this time.

“Then I’m a bottom-line president.”

A moment of silence passes. Then another. We both lean back. I’m writing “bottom-line” over and over in my notebook. I want him to speak first. He does.

“I’m running a large multi-million dollar corporation. I’m not Madonna. But more than that, I’m not a [public relations] agent. I’m not here to fill a chair and make everybody happy. The Board is paying me a lot of money to accomplish certain goals. And if people like me along the way, that’s great. But it’s very easy for people who have never talked to me, including students, who have never spent a minute with me alone, to go, ‘Oh, he’s a jerk.’”

Lefton laughs.

“They don’t know whether I’m a jerk or not.”

“I guess that proposes the problem,” I say. “The impossible situation. If you were to go out and—”

“Then I wouldn’t get anything done,” he finishes.

“I have a very optimistic view of the world,” Lefton announces, as he returns from his minifridge with a can of Diet Coke. “A very realistic one. I’m in a realistic job that deals with real politics, but my inner soul is much more optimistic.”

Between long swigs, Lefton explains that his “rose-colored” outlook comes from his mother, Sylvia, who never believed in worrying. (“You’ll find the right girl, and it will all work out — that kind of thing,” he says.) From his father, Bernard, he was taught that conscientious hard work and focus would win the day.

When Lefton was growing up in Boston, his parents owned and operated a photography business; Bernard did the shooting, and Sylvia did the bookkeeping. As a teenager, he served as his father’s
assistant, learning how to compose shots and develop cut-sheet film. By 17, he was a “full-fledged photographer,” and he spent his weekends shooting portraits, bar mitzvahs and weddings.

“I was pretty good,” Lefton laughs. “I had my own tuxedo.”

When he was 19, a sophomore at Northeastern University, his father died. Lefton abruptly quit college and returned home to take over the family business. Three months later, in the midst of “figuring out what to do,” his mother died.

“I could have made a living at [photography],” Lefton says as he straightens his tie. “But I’m the first in my family to go to college. So, that was part of, ‘Well, what would Dad have wanted?’”

Lefton sold the business in the summer of 1965 and returned to Northeastern in the fall.

“I just couldn't see myself taking baby pictures for the rest of my life,” he says.

Today, Lefton takes the pictures he wants to take; he sees things the way he wants to see them. Is there a happy medium between “the Christ of presidents” and the bottom-liner? Probably. But it’s not Lester Lefton, and it’s not going to be. And it’s not because he’s a bad person; it’s because the Board of Trustees and the public hold, on some level, fundamentally different expectations for the president.

“The Board expects [Lefton] to be spending more and more time out in the northeast Ohio community meeting and interacting with business leaders, as well as lobbying for the University in Columbus and Washington — in between visiting with high-potential alumni donors,” writes Gary Kustis, an Aldridge Group management consultant, in Lefton’s 2012 performance review.

Kustis suggests that not only will Lefton “need direction on where to balance these competing demands,” but the Board must “appreciate that large strides in these areas may not be possible.”

Kustis also concludes that “the Board’s direction to him to raise promotion and tenure standards helped to create the tension he is now dealing with.”

Lester Lefton, the pitchman, the comedian, the cheerleader, the consultant — the embattled optimist — is in the midst of a six-year, high-wire act. The stakes are high, the crowd is restless and the wire only tightens with each step. This is why Lefton’s nights are sleepless; yet this is why his world must remain rose-colored.

“It’s always there,” he says. “It doesn’t go away. In a large, public university, where you’ve been given this trust, it’s a privilege, and it’s a burden.”

As I walk out the door of Lefton’s office, I have to wonder: Which was it today? After a few steps, I glance back.

Lefton’s still lingering outside his door. He’s grinning, as if he has his own private joke. Then, the hallway bends, I meet the exit, and he’s gone. ❋
This spring, 17 Kent State students once again helped a community uncover its past — in an attempt to understand its present.

BY DANIEL MOORE (CLASS OF 2014)
THEBURR.COM EXCLUSIVE, MAY 2013

In a 15-acre plot of land in southern Memphis, Tenn., countless secrets are buried. They’re buried beneath rugged terrain, riddled with unexpected sinkholes and rectangular-shaped depressions. They’re beneath tall grasses and colorful flowers and vines that creak in the wind. They’re buried beneath dense thickets of deciduous trees: tall black cherries, blooming southern magnolias, winged elms and red maples. For years, these secrets have remained just that — secrets — unknowingly perpetuating the tension that has been imbedded in this part of the country for more than 200 years.

But every year, more and more of these secrets come to light — whether it be through the swings of an ax, the unearthing of tombstones or endless hours of combing carefully archived records. And, once uncovered, the secrets mean something different to everyone — if they mean anything at all.

In 2003, Christina McVay, a Kent State professor and self-described “cemetery nut,” drove right past Zion Christian Cemetery, located in Memphis’ Glenview neighborhood, thinking it was a forest. She was searching for the grave of Thomas Moss, one of three black businessmen who was lynched in 1892, after his grocery store grew competitive with a white-owned store across the street. McVay drove by, again and again, until it dawned on her that the cemetery was right there — that Moss’ grave was among the “wild jungle,” as some residents remember it.

“We thought it’d be a kept up cemetery,” McVay says. “But you could see no headstones. Nobody was doing anything.”

For spring and fall semesters since then, McVay has led caravans of volunteers from Kent State to join the Zion Community Project, Inc. in making slow but steady progress toward its goal of clearing and maintaining the oldest all-black cemetery in Memphis. Within a decade, the upstart nonprofit has joined forces with more than a dozen community organizations — Kent State one of few outside Tennessee — to develop a long-term restoration strategy.

On the first Saturday of their 2013 spring break, 17 students arrive at St. John’s Episcopal Church in unseasonably cold rain. They sleep on the floor of the expansive church’s youth activity room and eat cheaply in its kitchen. They hurl dodge balls in its gymnasium and play hide-and-seek in its variety of storage rooms during the downtime that accumulates after the heavy downpour delays their first morning of scheduled work.

When it’s finally clear enough on the second morning, the students pile into McVay’s RV for a few miles’ drive to the cemetery’s entrance on South Parkway Avenue. The approach an iron arch and a locked gate that someone hops out to open.

McVay sets up camp on the main dirt road and offers cautious warnings — “pace yourself,” and “don’t hurt yourself” — warnings that seem obvious and ominous as the students pick up sharpened axes, hedge clippers and 10-inch pruning saws from plastic bins and begin violently hacking away at the thick underbrush (Later that first day, Maryssa Garrett encounters what everyone decided must have been a tiny nail that went through her shoe and bloodied her foot. After a trip to the Methodist hospital downtown, she would observe the rest of the week’s work from crutches.)

The students perform what boils down to monotonous physical labor. With each methodic connection of Nate Choma’s ax, a tree trunk chips thinner until, with one final heave, he uproots the base from the ground with his bare hands. He shoulders it into the air and carries it to a growing pile of dead wood. Wearing a bright yellow T-shirt and orange bandana, tall and lanky and serious, Choma does this all day.

Others piece together fractured tombstones. Thylitha Johnson is deep in the most densely wooded section, near the back of the cemetery — its boundary marked by the Frisco Railroad Line with its periodic, roaring trains. She discovers the front face of a tombstone, trapped perfectly flat in the deep mud.

Others are elsewhere, dragging shoes, blown-out tires and rims,
By the time its deed was transferred to General Board of Personnel Services at Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church in 1990, the cemetery had been neglected for decades. The church’s 25-page “master plan” to restore the cemetery provides as much factual information as possible, but much of it is theory. It notes the degradation through percentages of tree cover — 10 percent in 1937, 65 percent in 1986 — and oddly specific descriptions of the growth: “tall grass, honeysuckle and other vines, wild rose and briar, privet and tree seedlings.” It promises an initial $102,239 budget for irrigation pipeline and graveling the main road.

It also tries to piece together a history of muddled transitions of private ownership, through scanned letters and documents from the churches and clubs involved. But we don’t have the strength. “Maybe if I wasn’t 78, I’d get out and make speeches and try to get the churches and clubs involved. But we don’t have the strength. We’re doing all we know how.”

The article describes the disarray: “The cemetery’s winding, once scenic drive resembles a logging road. Tombstones have been defaced, stolen and used as chopping blocks and makeshift picnic tables. Garbage is everywhere.”

In the late 1970s, the cemetery was unofficially claimed by Isaiah Rowser, a pastor working for a religious nonprofit from Nashville. Quoted in newspaper articles from 1979, Rowser says he sought to fix the cemetery when he bulldozed its southwestern corner, misplacing headstones and causing general destruction that only a court order from Christian brought to a halt. Today, the church’s master plan names this section the “Disturbed Meadow.” With the absence of any written record, the names of those buried in the Disturbed Meadow will never be known.

“Your generation’s civil rights movement will be socio-economic prejudice,” Jim Carroll tells McVay’s students first thing one morning.

Carroll is the executive director of Chose 901, a nonprofit that encourages young people to invest in Memphis, hooking them up with various nonprofits in the “buckle of the Bible Belt.” He has dropped by to thank the students, who are still groggy from an all-nighter the night before.

“It’s a Kent State student who found Thomas Moss’s grave nine years ago in the final hour of the last day of the trip. He was crawling, McVay says, because the growth was so thick. The burial sites of the other two lynching victims are still lost somewhere among the cemetery’s 15 acres.

“There are still a lot of mysteries,” McVay admits, cautiously walking to her favorite spot in Zion: the grave of 19-year-old Arthur Trice, whose tombstone unflinchingly states: “Killed on Nov. 8 1900.” An arched script reads: “Gone but Not Forgotten.”

“But, you know, we know a ton more than we knew when I first came here,” McVay says.

“I always thought it was a forest,” says Zion board member Peatchola Jones-Cole, who also serves as chief of employee education at the veterans affairs hospital in Memphis. “You walk past history every day, and you don’t even know it.”

Jones-Cole is part of a committee of archaeologists, professors, historians and researchers attempting to piece it all together. Stacked on a heavy wooden table on the fourth floor of the Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library — a sprawling, contemporary storehouse of historical records — is everything the library could find on the cemetery. Jim Johnson, the library’s senior manager of history and social sciences, goes through each item and explains its significance.

Binders of census records from the 1800s, annual yearbooks of black businesses, city maps showing land ownership and an atlas-sized, leather-bound burial registry, containing approximately 21,000 handwritten names of those who were interred from 1895 to 1974. The first 18 years were lost or destroyed.

It’s here the committee is beginning its research for a comprehensive book on the cemetery, tracing the genealogy of those interred and finding living relatives along the way, effectively checkmarking the nonprofit’s secondary goal: “to engender a greater public understanding of the significance of local history.”

A volume called “Historical Documents About Zion Cemetery,” is full of scanned letters like those among the county’s economic developers that discuss the “sketchy” rules about who is actually legally responsible for addressing health concerns at the cemetery.

By the 1970s, all record of ownership had fallen into the hands of George Christian, the last living descendant of the original founders. His wife, Eva, is quoted in a 1981 newspaper clipping: “Maybe if I wasn’t 78, I’d get out and make speeches and try to get the churches and clubs involved. But we don’t have the strength. We’re doing all we know how.”

But in order to understand how to clear the forest, one must understand why those around it let it grow.
Some in the room visibly disagree with Carroll’s point, shaking their heads at him, but he insists — “No, really.”

Just a mile from Zion Cemetery, two police cars speed and whoop sirens through the intersection of Mississippi and Walker streets, where the store ran by Thomas Moss still stands on the corner. Its windows are barred with gates and the “People’s Grocery” sign faded. A silver historical marker tries to explain the lynching to anyone who doesn’t already know. According to the sign, Moss’ dying words were: “Tell my people to go west — there is no justice for them here.”

A few feet away, a homemade wooden cross marks the shooting death of a drug dealer known as “Fish,” and a sign that begs for an end to gun violence has blown backward into the grass: “Education is the key to stop the killing.” A revolving door of businesses has occupied the other three corners as long as local residents can remember.

On the other side of the Disturbed Meadows’ chain-linked fence — the dead end of Gleason Street, Chris Jamerson, 35, and his friend, Artis Mitchell, 57, work on the engine of a white Ford. Throughout the years, they have witnessed the cemetery’s clearing from their backyard.

“That little bit [they’re] doing helps,” Jamerson says. “I mean, I don’t know how much it means to [them], you know, if it’s just a grade. But every little input helps. That [they] are even over there, picking up a shovel or a rake, that’s a lot of work.”

When the students leave, Jamerson says, the inmates that have cleared the front part of the cemetery will come back. He’s talked to them before. He knows a lot of them.

“I ask them how they feel about it,” Jamerson says. “It’s work to them. They don’t think of it as, like, this historic graveyard. It’s a job to them. And when it’s a job, you don’t care about it.”

He hops back up inside the engine of the truck but keeps talking.

“Everybody wants to know about the past, that’s the thing. Everybody should know about the past. By staying here, you can see the difference by looking at your door every day. You might have three people under that tree. How would we know? Those grave stones are broken up.”

At the end of Gleason, years of cemetery intruders have trampled the fence to a 45-degree angle. It makes Jamerson, too, worry about the younger generation's disconnect.

“[W]e got to know, hey, we got to try and do something, or our future’s gonna be fucked up,” he says. “The young generation isn’t thinking about this stuff — so they lost, you know what I’m saying? All they thinking about is the drugs, and the gangs, and the women and shit like that — so they lost.”

Jamerson hops back down from the truck engine.

“We got to do something fast, guys, because while we at each other’s neck ... it’s gonna come a time when it’s too late.”

Two days after McVay and the students pack up tools and leave town, approximately 60 Ku Klux Klan members rally at the Shelby County Courthouse against the city council’s proposed name changes to local parks: Confederate Park to Memphis Park, Jefferson Davis Park to Mississippi River Park and, the most provocative, Nathan Bedford Forrest Park, named after the group’s founder, to Health Sciences Park.

News reports estimate more than 1,000 attend a counter rally.

“Sometimes I think we celebrate the wrong stuff,” says Rev. Roland Johnston as he strolls through Zion Cemetery for the first time in a long while. “We close our eyes to certain things in history, and we try to shove it down somebody else’s throat.”

Johnson is pastor of Trinity branch of CME Church located in North Memphis, one of the roughest parts of the city. He’s also vice president of the nonprofit board. He’s an easygoing guy who just got done with a round of golf and speaks in a mellow, comforting tone. Walking the main road that stretches from the front meadows to the back forests, he notices minor details that have been shifted, uprooted and dragged away from his memory, much like racism throughout his lifetime.

When Johnson moved to a new neighborhood five years ago, he says, the two white residents next door didn’t move. Years ago, this would not have happened. What they did do, he says, was say was, “Welcome to the neighborhood.” Today, Johnson believes the racial divide exists in more subtle undertones. He talks about large national political movements like voter identification laws as “voter suppression,” which hurts “not just African-Americans but also elderly white people. Poor people in general.”

For Johnson, much like John Carroll, poverty is an undeniable divider.

“One of the beauties of segregated neighborhoods is you went to school with the doctor’s kids,” he says. “Nobody knew they were poor because everybody had the same stuff. You didn’t wear $150 sneakers. One of the beauties of the South is you know where you stand. You know where you are.”

“THERE ARE STILL A LOT OF MYSTERIES BUT, YOU KNOW, WE KNOW A TON MORE THAN WE KNEW WHEN I FIRST CAME HERE.”

Spencer Ross
Kent State professor
It’s an interesting concept — divisions uniting people, making them feel comfortable. Of course, Johnson isn’t endorsing segregation; rather, he suggests that projects like the cemetery renovation can create new ties among a disconnected generation.

“A lot of it has to do with people not sitting down and talking to each other, not trying to learn each other, not understanding that diversity is actually a good thing.”

Cynthia Gray, who works a few blocks away at the Shell gas station on the corner of South Parkway and Bellevue Street, says she stopped walking through the cemetery years ago.

“You got all kinds of people there — up to no good,” she says, noting that prostitutes and drug dealers once operated in the cemetery in broad daylight.

When asked if she would return to the cemetery after the renovations, she says, “Sure, we would walk through it again [because] we wouldn’t be so scared. A lot of people used to walk through there to get their kids from school.”

But for many who pass Zion, it might as well still be a mystery.

Generations have moved out, new ones have moved in. Next to the cemetery is an emptied out tenement housing complex, a series of at least a dozen windowless buildings, all fenced in with barbed wire. In some cases, the doors hang open, creaking in the wind. Most are padlocked, covered in newspapers and boarded up. The houses in the immediate vicinity of the cemetery appear similar.

From his office in CME Church’s plush headquarters on South Elvis Presley Boulevard, Warner Dickerson spends an hour talking about race in America through lenses of politics and economics, looping hypotheticals in which he puts himself into the shoes of slave owners to view slavery as a truly pragmatic benefit to the south.

As the 75-year-old program chair for CME Church and former president of the Memphis NAACP branch justifies the trade of his black slave ancestors using the analogy of a cattle farmer needing to grow his farm.

He’s playing devil’s advocate, but he’s being serious.

As a young man at the University of Memphis, Dickerson says he was bitter, and that he hated whites. But as he studied and learned history, he says he changed. But during his time with the NAACP — an organization spawned in the aftermath of Moss’ lynching — Dickerson says he was baffled it didn’t receive much support from young people.

As he talked with parents his age, he began to realize why this upcoming generation “doesn’t feel” the concept of racism.

“What [parents] say to me is, that stuff is painful. That’s why I didn’t want to talk about it with my children,” he says. “So if they don’t talk about [race], then how do they know?”

“It’s a brainwashing process, both on the part of the oppressor and oppressed,” Dickerson continues. “As a black citizen of Memphis, here is a cemetery that has interred the history of the black community. We need to use it as a teaching tool.”

Dickerson says the renovation project is another tactic to combat racism, money and human imperfection, all “so simplistic you might miss it.”

After all, how do you eat an elephant, he asks?

One bite at a time.
I was late to class. All around me, the kids looked like Christmas had been canceled. The professor walked up and down the rows dropping blue books as he went. When one landed on the desk of the girl next to me, she looked like she was going to puke. She stared at it like it was an organ in a jar.

“What is this about?” I asked with a spooky calm.

“The midterm.” She looked at me like I was an organ in a jar.

“No shit?” Now the entire class was looking at me the same way. “Man, I totally forgot.” I gingerly took out a pencil and dug in.

This was the best part of my day, after all. Jess was at home with a pretty nasty case of the ole Ovarian Cancer. A surprise midterm seemed like a lazy Saturday watching Looney Tunes compared to being at home.

I didn’t have much of a life before I knew Jess. That is not exaggeration; I literally wasn’t on this earth for very long when we first crossed paths. Jess and I rode the same bus to grade school starting in the second grade. She was actually in the first grade, so I was way too cool to acknowledge her existence, but she was there, toe headed and buried behind glasses thicker than the safety glass they use on basement windows. For me, she would still have been a catch; the me with the three missing teeth, speech impediment, pigeon-toed feet; the me who still sometimes meekly emerges under the strain of harsh criticism or a bullying tone.

Years passed, miles grew between us. She lost the glasses. Actually, she donated them to NASA and they now make up over fifty percent of the Hubble space telescope’s advanced lenses (of course I’m kidding). My teeth grew in, I learned to properly say the letter ‘r.’ Pubescence sprung on us with a whole new set of awkward deficiencies, and we met again. She was lovely, long and blond, skinny and funny, smarter than me in every way. I liked her, in the off-putting way of a stoned fifteen-year-old, but I never told her. We hung out in basements and in front of pizza joints. I made her laugh.

More years. I moved to Texas after high school and spent some time trying to find myself and sleeping on couches. I found myself (I had been on a couch in Texas the whole time!) and moved to Mississippi. There, I tried love and decided it wasn’t for me. I packed my car with everything I owned and fled the Old South. When I crossed the Waffle House/IHOP line which separates the South from the North, I took a deep breath and swore off love forever. I spent the next three years celibate, dodging women like bullets. That’s the way I choose to remember it, at least.

Every now and then, my mother would tell me that a pretty young artist had told her to tell me hello. I didn’t recognize her last name, she had gotten married, I assumed it was just another stalker following me online. She sent me a friend request on a social network and I turned her down, saying that I was only friends with people who I was actually friends with. I did this with some trepidation, having browsed through her pictures, but that was my policy, and the years without sex had made it fairly easy to ignore a beguiling smile. Jess told me who she was and I accepted her online friendship gladly.

From the very beginning, we wrote every night. She was divorced, a new love-hater, and I welcomed her to our ranks. As the days bled into weeks, I found myself checking the computer earlier and earlier. If there was no new message, I would read the old one, take it apart, look for any sign that she was thawing like me. There were never any misspellings, there was never any lazy internet shorthand, every message read like a letter on paper. She never said LOL, which may have been a deal breaker at that early stage. What we didn’t know was that as our feelings for each other grew, something else was growing as well.

She avoided me for months before finally agreeing to meet me at a local dive bar. When she walked in, my life as I had known it was over. Most of her head was shaved, she had a pokey blond Mohawk, and she was still the most feminine creature there. She didn’t see me, and I let her walk by my booth. I needed a second to say goodbye to my old life. I actually thought that at the time. How
rare to see things as they truly are when they are happening. She turned around and looked at me and I exhaled years of bitterness and cynicism in a single “hello.”

The first kiss was in her driveway. I fought the urge to chew her face off. If you think that sounds crazy, you have never been in love. We got a place together, a hellhole with a landlord and a basement that were both usually full of crap. Things were good.

A year later, she got sick. Jess was 27 years old, a drug-free nonsmoking vegetarian. I eat meat every day, smoked for a decade, practically lobbied the universe for cancer. By some cosmic spin of a roulette wheel, it went to her instead.

It started with pain in her abdomen. The problems were misdiagnosed as ovarian cysts, a fairly common, but painful, malady. It was as if she walked into a hospital with a bullet in her head and was told that it was a headache, go home and take some Advil. After months and several hospital visits, the truth was revealed. Her gynecologist, the one who had misdiagnosed her, stood in front of her parents and me, hat in hand, and told us to get a good oncologist.

It was stage three. Her oncologist sounded like a radio ad for a closing Saturn dealership.

“Fifty percent chance of survival! Everything must go!”

The surgery was arduous, the recovery seemed like a dark lifetime.

“But wait, there's more! Buy a Saturn today and I will throw in six months of intensive chemotherapy! No money down! I will even throw in a free Beyoncé wig!”

When they pulled out her reproductive system, they added some new hardware. A port is a temporary diaphragm, made of rubber and metal that is inserted inside the chest to allow smoother and more complete insertion of chemo medicines. The outline of the apparatus is clearly visible through the skin. It's wild: “We are going to take these ovaries, but don't worry, we left you a little extra something. Just think of it as a third nipple.”

There are places where everything is more real, pockets where we can't hide from the truth. A room crowded with oncology patients getting chemotherapy is one of those places. I have been in cathedrals, stood within Stonehenge. When it comes to spiritual strength, these piles of rocks don't have anything on Tri-County Oncology and Hematology. It is a shrine to the temporary and fleeting nature of life, and the coffee is always fresh.

Before Jess got sick, I was in the clinic on business. I could feel the eyes of the damned on me. I felt pity for the patients, lined up in rows reading magazines and watching soap operas while young nurses hooked them to machines and attempted to poison the death out of them. Once Jess was a patient there I understood something about the people hooked to those tubes; they were more alive than I have ever been. While I looked at them with pity, they were looking through me. I was just another shell, wasting my life by not loving it as much as I should.

When I think about that place now, I can smell the German chocolate blend coffee and I can see Jess in that chair, tubes poking out, throwing up gang signs for the camera.

Work was a daily exercise in Zen. A customer would call with a complaint or the boss would lash out and I had to fight the urge to smile. It was like watching children argue about something ridiculous and having to pretend that what they are saying is important. “Don't you care that you are two minutes late?” I didn't, of course, but I wished that I did. All I wanted in the world was to care about the insignificant things that plague most people.

School was my escape, a universe outside of cancer, or as much outside as possible. My professors were understanding and kind, only occasionally looking at me like an unknown specter carrying an unknowable weight. My grades stayed good, in spite of the fact
that I didn't buy a textbook for three semesters. I still don't remember much of what I learned in class, except in odd flashbacks. Even now, sometimes during dinner I will look up and proclaim something like “Did you know John Wilkes Booth was in Harper's Ferry when John Brown was hanged?” I don't remember learning that, but I bet it's true! I was the only ghost on the dean's list.

My classmates' reaction was slightly different from my professors. I always make at least one male friend in each class, but the dudes all avoided me as though my emotional fragility was contagious. They looked at me like I was in Fight Club, an unstable element that just wasn't worth their time. The girls, some of whom I had classes with before the cancer, seemed to gravitate towards me. When they saw me, some primal Mommy Button was pressed in them and a loudspeaker rattled in their heads, “I must take care of him, right now!” Hey guys, want to meet women? Add some tragedy to your life, you will be irresistible. I just wanted to be left alone. After a while, I was, at which point I was lonely. I was going more than a little crazy.

I got an A on the exam that I hadn't studied for. For those semesters, I got mostly A's. It was as though my professors, God bless them, knew that the education I was getting at school paled in comparison to the one I was getting at home. I think they also knew that I needed school. I was a caretaker for her, and they were caretakers for me. They also knew that somehow I was learning the material.

Back at home, her hair started to fall out, and rather than let her blondness go quietly, she shaved her head. “You can't fire me, I quit,” she told the universe, that spinner of roulette wheels, and that act of defiance made me love her even more. I saw for the first time the steel in her, the fire that couldn't be extinguished by surgery or chemo. I felt like kissing her like I did in her driveway. I felt like a coward. I can't sleep for days before a dentist appointment, at the first sign of a cold I wave a white flag and reach for the NyQuil. I felt like kissing her like I did in her driveway. I felt like Joan of Arc with shorter hair. All I could offer was laughter.

Humor was our armor. I did my best to maintain the facade of a sunny and light outlook. My father had given me great advice: If I have to cry, do it in the shower. To this day, the smell of panic and fear is the piquant aroma of Irish Spring. The little boy with the pigeon toes and three missing teeth emerged in the shower to fret about the girl with the thick glasses. I was watching the person I love more than anyone suffer horribly, every day professing that love while being secretly afraid to feel it, everyday feeling more alone in the world. What kind of person wouldn't laugh in that situation?

One night, she dozed with her glasses on top of her head. When I glanced over, I nearly had a heart attack. The way her glasses sat, it looked like she was a person with no face, glasses floating oddly on a blank pink plane. It was an amazing metaphor for what cancer does to a person, and it was hilarious. I took a picture, I had to, she had to see this. When her nap was over I showed it to her, she laughed, and we had an impromptu photo shoot, her modeling her blank face, me spouting out commands in a terrible French accent. “That's it, now show me naughty! Beautiful!” We laughed and then I took a nice long shower.

Every chance I got, I would don one of her many wigs. The Beyonce is a classic choice for any classy lady looking to cover her glossy bald dome, or any man singing a falsetto version of “Single Ladies (Put a Ring On It)” in front of said classy lady. The wilder hot pink number was good for any occasion, really, the little black dress of cancer wear.

I was a clown, a zen master and a maniac, rolled into one very clean package. As she fought her battle, I quietly fought my own. Whatever the outcome, it was going to be a long time before either one of us got better, if we ever would.

Two years have passed, faster than the mind and heart can comprehend. There have been no signs of cancer since the end of her chemotherapy. Maybe the universe isn't such a sick bastard after all. When it was happening, I thought that this experience would totally change me, make me somehow immune to the fears of the average person. If she survived, I pictured myself rejoicing in every minute of life like a scarred Buddha. Of course, that hasn't been the case. My nightmares have slowly reverted from watching my love waste away to things like forgetting about work or showing up to class and finding out there is a midterm I haven't studied for. In short, I care about the insignificant things again, and that's alright. For some of us, sweating the small stuff holds a joy all its own.

A few weeks ago I slept through my alarm and missed an important class. I was raving like a lunatic, damning a universe cruel enough to hijack my alarm clock.

She rolled over, blond hair draped across her face, and looked at me. “It's not the end of the world.”

“I WAS WATCHING THE PERSON I LOVE MORE THAN ANYONE SUFFER HORRIBLY, EVERY DAY PROFESSING THAT LOVE WHILE BEING SECRETLY AFRAID TO FEEL IT, EVERYDAY FEELING MORE ALONE IN THE WORLD.”

Mark Haymond
MY UPRIGHT LIFE

Christina Bucciere learns the power of the mind as she faces the biggest challenge of her life.

BY CHRISTINA BUCCIERE (CLASS OF 2014)

DECEMBER 2013 ISSUE

SIXTH PLACE, Intercollegiate College Personality/Profile Writing
The Hearst Journalism Awards Program

The Answer

The doctor with the sparkling white teeth and chocolate-brown hair walks into my room. He flashes his Colgate smile, and I answer with the slightest raise of one corner of my mouth, all I can possibly muster. Every part of my body aches, more from exhaustion at this point than real pain. I resent the ease of his smile. I resent the ease with which he walks into my room. I want him out, but I have to sit through yet another even-tempered evaluation of my future. Doctors cannot show any signs of optimism. In fact, I'm not certain their vocabularies include the words yes and no at all.

He unwraps the gauze coddling my blackened feet. His back is turned to me, but even still I squeeze my eyes shut. Even if he is a doctor, I cannot imagine one easily stomachs the view of mumified feet, and I am convinced someone will eventually lose their lunch at the sight and smell of my decaying appendages.

My mom stands at my bedside. She peppers him with questions. Before he could possibly have time to process the question — let alone develop an answer — the standard reply flies from his mouth.

"We'll know in time."

My mom rebuts with the most-asked question in any hospital.

“How much time?”

Cue the next standard reply.

“It's hard to say,” he says with a persuasive look of uncertainty.

But is it? Too often doctors actually have a solid idea of “how much time,” but they are trained to manage expectations. Hopes should never get too high. This is why I am shocked by what comes next. After performing his routine examination, he asks if I have any questions. Just one. The one. Always the one.

“Will I ever walk again?” I whisper, moisture coating the edges of my eyelashes.

I expect a tempered answer. Most doctors, up to this point, evade this question like it is their life's mission. Instead, with an unwavering voice and the full attention of his eyes boring into mine, he replies with the monosyllabic symphony that is a “yes.”

Tears. Pouring, racing, pooling onto my oversized, mint-green hospital gown.

This I am not expecting. This is a miracle. I will use my feet again. I will feel earth under my soles. I will feel waves crash against my ankles. I will be OK.

Months later, sitting in the passenger's seat in my dad's sedan, I think back to this moment. Suddenly, I taste salty tears on my lips. This time, however, the tears are unwelcome. It took me more than a year to realize the doctor meant what he said. I would walk again, but not with those feet.
The Nightmare

On May 22, 2011, I woke up feeling like I had the flu. The symptoms were typical, nothing I hadn’t experienced before, so I brushed them aside and went to work. Within two hours, a pounding headache had set in, and I was chilled to the bone. My body screamed to go home, so I left work early and collapsed into bed, expecting to sleep off what I hoped was a 24-hour bug. My head had other plans. Within 30 minutes, I was writhing. A headache like I’d never experienced took control of my entire body. The pain was crushing, as though my skull was splitting from the inside out. By 11 p.m., when I finally knew I had to go to the ER, I could hardly see straight.

The ER doctor diagnosed me with mono and sent me home. The virus must have still been in my system from when I had it four months prior. Even so, I knew something was dangerously wrong. I stayed up the rest of the night. All attempts to ease my pain were useless. At some point, I finally dozed off on my couch — in part from exhaustion, I’m sure — but largely because my body was shutting down, giving up. At about 6 a.m., my dad came to check on me and noticed a bruise-like lesion on my ankle. He pushed the blanket covering my legs to one side and discovered the lesions were covering my entire body — a rash called petechiae, resulting from toxic levels of bacteria in the bloodstream, I learned later.

Before long, I arrived at the ER once again, this time in a far worse state. My mom helped me, in my disoriented state, walk through the sliding doors. Immediately, I stumbled to the bathroom, fell to my knees against the cold, hard, tile floor and vomited harshly into the toilet, another sign of toxic shock. Soon after, I was laid down on a bed. The fluorescent lights were harsh on my searing skull. And then, black.

The next time I would wake, my life would be changed forever. Bacterial meningitis. My newest and most aggressive enemy. The bacteria infect the meninges, the tissues around the brain, causing them to swell. Soon, the body enters septic shock, causing vital organs to shut down. In order to save me, the doctors used a medication called pressors to pull blood toward my vital organs, leaving little on which my extremities could survive, so they began to die.

By May of the following year, I would be a bilateral below-knee and fingertips amputee, all 10.

Awake

My eyes opened to see the tear-stained face of my dad. This wasn't the dad I was used to. The room was blurry, but my other senses made up for my lack of visual clarity. My ears picked up the scurrying of feet, the hushed voices and the incessant, high-pitched beeping coming from the many machines to which my life was clinging, including a 5-foot-tall dialysis machine, cleaning my broken kidneys 24 hours a day. Wires everywhere, sprouting from my body like rivulets transporting fluids back to the main river. I knew I was lying on some sort of bed. I felt weak. I felt pain. It spread throughout all the extremities of my body, pulsating like angry, ocean waves. I heard a question, one I wasn’t sure how to answer. It came from my own mouth.

“What happened?”

I don’t remember the answer, though I’m sure there was only a muted version of the truth in reply. Because if my family were being truthful, they would have told me I should be dead. My eyes closed once more, too exhausted from my brief excursion to the surface. The next time they opened, I would know the truth.

Panic overtook me when I realized I couldn’t speak. Try as I might, no words would make it past my lips. My throat was overtaken by a ventilator sprouting from my mouth, coaxing my lungs to pump air through my body. It’s difficult to pinpoint the details — the people who were there, the conversations that took place, but there are moments I will never forget. Moments that will never leave me alone. Moments that will haunt me like spirits too angry to move on.

I cannot say how many days passed until the ventilator was removed, but I remember, so vividly, when the doctor removed it from my throat. The feeling of words forming in my throat and fighting their way out until, faint and feeble as they might have been, I heard them singing to me. With them came heavy tears of joy and pain. Joy for regaining my sense of verbal freedom, pain for knowing the world would want some answers, answers I wasn’t ready to articulate.

My mom had called my dad to let him know of the new development. When he came to my bedside, I looked at him with tears in my eyes and a shy smile and, barely audible, spoke two words: “Hi, Dad.” I had never seen my dad cry so easily, but he did then,

“IT TOOK ME MORE THAN A YEAR TO REALIZE THE DOCTOR MEANT WHAT HE SAID. I WOULD WALK AGAIN, BUT NOT WITH THOSE FEET.”

Christina Bucciare
round droplets forming rivers along his sunken cheekbones. He nodded, stroking my hair, tacit, understanding that this moment meant everything would be OK. And it would be. In time.

I spent two months in the hospital. First the intensive care unit, then the pediatric intensive care unit at Akron General Hospital, then a combination PICU and rehabilitation hospital and, finally, a concentrated rehabilitation hospital. Once I returned home, I spent the next eight months waiting to see how much of my feet and fingers would heal before determining what would have to go. On Sept. 13, 2011, I underwent surgery at the Cleveland Clinic to remove all 10 fingertips. On Jan. 3, 2012, my right foot was amputated, and on Jan. 20, 2012, my left foot followed suit.

About three weeks after the surgery on my hands, I sat in an office while two nurses unwrapped the thick bandages. As they got closer to the last layer, my breathing became shallow. I resolved not to close my eyes. If I couldn’t face my own hands, who could?

One by one, they removed the final, yellow patches protecting the wounded tips. A single tear fell from my lower lashes as I saw the swollen, short and stubby remnants of my fingers.

“Some people are bawling when they only have to have one of their fingertips amputated,” one of the nurses said. “You’re being very brave.” Brave, or stoically seething. She didn’t need to know the difference.

That was the first surgery I ever had. My swollen fingers were practically useless to me for the next month, and I was convinced they would be forever.

But after nearly eight months of living with feet that were no longer mine, I begged my doctor for amputation. He and my parents were hesitant to make any quick decisions because of the finality of amputation, but I saw my future for what it was, and it included amputation. It always had.

With so many months of mental preparation, surgery day was relatively easy.

I lay on a transportation bed parked outside the silver operating room doors. Nurses, aides and surgeons rushed past on their way to the next surgery, the next life-changing moment. I was calm, so calm in fact that I alarmed one of the nurses who stopped to ask me the purpose of my surgery.

“I’m just having my right foot amputated,” I said.

He smiled tensely, surprised by my lack of anxiety. He moved on quickly to the next patient, eager to get away from the girl who was so relaxed about losing a limb. Has she done this before? Should I call the police?

The truth is, I was happy. I couldn’t have been any more ready for surgery. I couldn’t wait to wake up, look down at my feet and no longer see two lifeless forms. Their absence would mean my new beginning.

One down, one to go.

Getting Up

It’s a steep, slippery, Mount Everest-like climb to attaining control of my feelings. And my balance — as I walk on glorified, anthropomorphized stilts — isn’t all that great.

Take, for instance, the time I fell down the steps of Franklin Hall in front of a group of writers and editors I highly respect, and my leg came off. That’s right, it fell off, like dropping a mitten or losing an earring.

Eerily enough, I had envisioned myself in that exact predicament earlier in the day, like my mind’s way of at least giving me fair warning of the humiliation in store. I think, based on my highly subjective opinion, every amputee has a fear of their prosthetic coming off in public. One might think this would be hard to do, but I assure you it’s far too easy. Granted, I had only been using my prosthetics without any assistive walking devices for about four months, so I was still in the infantile stages of amputeehood. Every step I took was measured and anticipated. If I lost focus for even a second, I was likely to fall over, and because I hadn’t mastered the getting-up part yet, this was not ideal, especially at a new school where I was not only the new kid, I was the new kid with missing limbs.

(And a bad haircut, but that’s beside the point.)

I was leaving a newspaper staff meeting, and a group of my peers was gathered outside on the steps leading down to my car. Already self-conscious of people watching me walk, I couldn’t think of anything else but the vision of me falling I had earlier in the day. Completely overthinking each step and desperately trying to look normal, down I went in a blaze of awkward yelping, exploding
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Christina Bucciere

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phone parts as it hit the concrete, and a fake leg sliding down the steps. It was a spectacle I’m sure neither I nor those present will soon, or ever, forget. Of course, being the nice students they are, several of them rushed to my aid, kindly ignoring the fact that my leg was detached from the rest of my body like a poor attempt at a Halloween prank. I retrieved my leg and shoved it on as quickly as possible all the while apologizing like a maniac for making them bear witness to my unfortunate mishap. Honestly, I haven’t the slightest idea what they said in response because I was too focused on getting my leg back on and booking it out of there as soon as possible. As soon as my leg was on just well enough to make it to my car, I was off, avoiding eye contact with any witnesses. To this day, I have no idea which of my peers saw this absurd moment in my car, I was off, avoiding eye contact with any witnesses. To this day, I have no idea which of my peers saw this absurd moment in my life, but to whoever you are ... actually, no. I’d still rather not know. Too soon.

To make a tragic story more tragic, I cried all the way home, cursing the gods and goddesses and the God and Allah and Buddha and any and all other spiritual beings I could think of for giving me this life. I spent the rest of the night replaying the scene frame by frame. And if it hadn’t been for the moment of clarity in my dad’s car, I would still be dwelling on this moment today. But I had to be better. If there was any hope of finding happiness again, I had to win the mental game.

Baby Steps

I often think back to the first time I saw my hands post-surgery. The tips looked like hard, black caps I could pull off one by one to reveal my real fingers underneath. The fingers on my left hand fared worse. My index finger contracted forming a hook I couldn’t unfurl. “I look like a monster,” I cried to my mom.

That’s a moment with which I’ll never lose touch. To see yourself as a non-human. I felt the same emotion the day I looked at myself in the mirror and saw metal where flesh used to be. Instead of elation, all I felt was heat. An anger so palpable my cheeks flushed. I was looking into the face of a broken person.

I stood at the end of the parallel bars. The 8-foot walk seemed like miles. I slowly eased my weight off of my hands and sunk into my sockets. The pressure mounted in the ends of my stumps. A pressure I was sure the bones at the base of my legs couldn’t withstand. I lifted my right foot, inched it forward and set it down on the linoleum.

“Remember to bend your knees, Christina,” my prosthetist said.

“Hi, I’m Christina.”