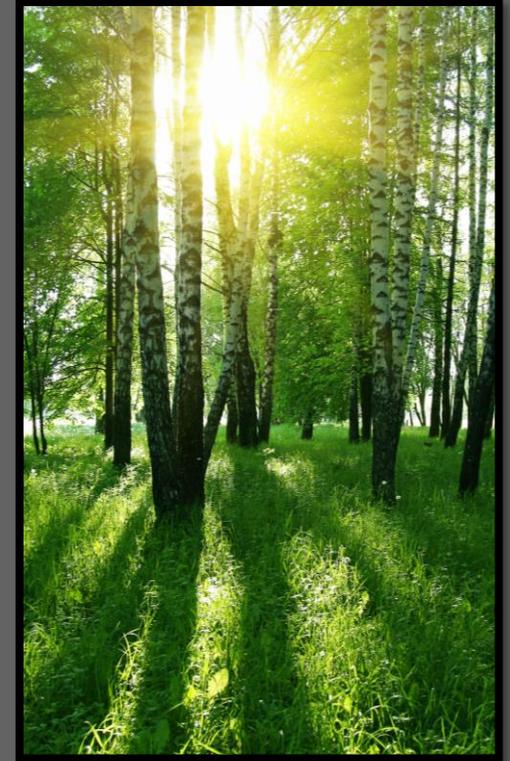


2017 Mental Health Awareness Art Display

Words Matter Exhibit

By Jessica Tookey



stigmafree
Idaho

WORDS MATTER

Artist Jessica Tookey

"Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me."

Looking back on my childhood, I realize how untrue this statement is. Why do we teach our children that words don't matter? They DO matter! I don't remember ANY physical pain from my childhood, but boy oh boy do I remember the emotional pains. It is rare, if possible at all, to find someone who was not teased or picked on by someone in their lifetime because of their looks or because they were "different". This sticks with a person and can contribute to depression and/or anxiety.

In October of 2014, I began my "What is Beauty" exhibit. I drew five young ladies who are not your "typical" beauty. Since then, I have added two faces and plan to continue to add faces as I meet more beautiful young ladies who were bullied because of how they look. I have incorporated these beauties into my "Words Matter" exhibit. This exhibit has the "What is Beauty" portraits as well as "Faces of Suicide" portraits. These images show happy, confident people. Even though they appear happy, each one struggled with bullying or mental illness and these smiling people took their own lives. My goal with this exhibit is to get people to realize that their words could be the final push, or the saving grace, for someone who is struggling. Words can cause more pain than sticks and stone...words can kill.

Everyone dreams of having the perfect nose, the perfect lips, or bigger muscles...but you are all perfect just the way you are. YOU are beautiful! A beautiful person focuses on the positive things in life; they look at the world around them and see the good instead of pointing out what they think should be better or different. You never know what struggle a person is going through. Sometimes, people are fighting demons that you know nothing about. Your words could be the difference between life and death. Whether you are male or female, it is up to YOU to be a beautiful person. Make a positive impact on this world instead of causing harm. I dare you to be kind.

I strive to share kindness and show the beauty that is all around and within us. I have been creating all of my life, ever since I could hold a tool to make marks with. But, it wasn't until 2014 that I felt the call to pursue art as a career and also had the idea to use my art to uplift the spirits of people. I draw and paint everything, but I focus most on portraiture. With portraits, I share love by bringing light back into the lives of people who have lost loved ones. It has been said that I "capture people's joy and light" in my drawings and paintings. With this exhibit, I am also trying to help smash the stigma of mental illness so that we can end suicide. Why did I choose suicide? Throughout my life, I have often had thoughts that everyone would be better off if I weren't here. In my childhood and teenage years, I even hurt myself...but not enough to make anyone notice. Thankfully, as a child, there wasn't anything that pushed me all the way over the edge. As an adult, those dark times did come, I found myself sitting in the dark bathroom with a razor blade. But, by that time, I had my baby girl in the other room. I am grateful that she is a bright light that pulled me out of the darkness. You should not be embarrassed if you've had thoughts of suicide, instead, you should own it and talk to someone about it. Some of us are wired differently...that's just the way we are. Through conversations, or art, we can heal ourselves and others. If you need to talk, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

See more of my work at CJsHouseofArt.com

Jessica Tookey



Anaise

Talking about depression, anxiety, anything dealing with mental health isn't something you do in the Polynesian Culture. It is rare you will find someone brave enough to speak about what they are going through. Anaise tried to open up to her sisters once but was rejected because to them, she was "over-reacting" and a "wannabe white girl", so, she has bottled everything up since she was a young girl. Living with her parents only until shortly after she turned ten, Ana struggles with anxiety in her relationships. Her parent's marriage was nowhere close to healthy. This dysfunctional relationship during her formative years made her feel like she doesn't deserve to have a happy family. Anaise often feels that every woman is a threat to her marriage; she remembers watching her mother spend time around other men, and worries that her husband will find someone else. She finds herself creating the most pointless fights, tearing her little family apart, even though she truly doesn't want that to happen. She feels trapped with her own thoughts, in the cycle of expecting – and sometimes forcing – herself to be alone. Thankfully, her husband encourages her and helps build her up emotionally, and she has found healthier ways to react to things. She is working to be stronger for her son and feels that talking about the problems will help her get past the anxiety.



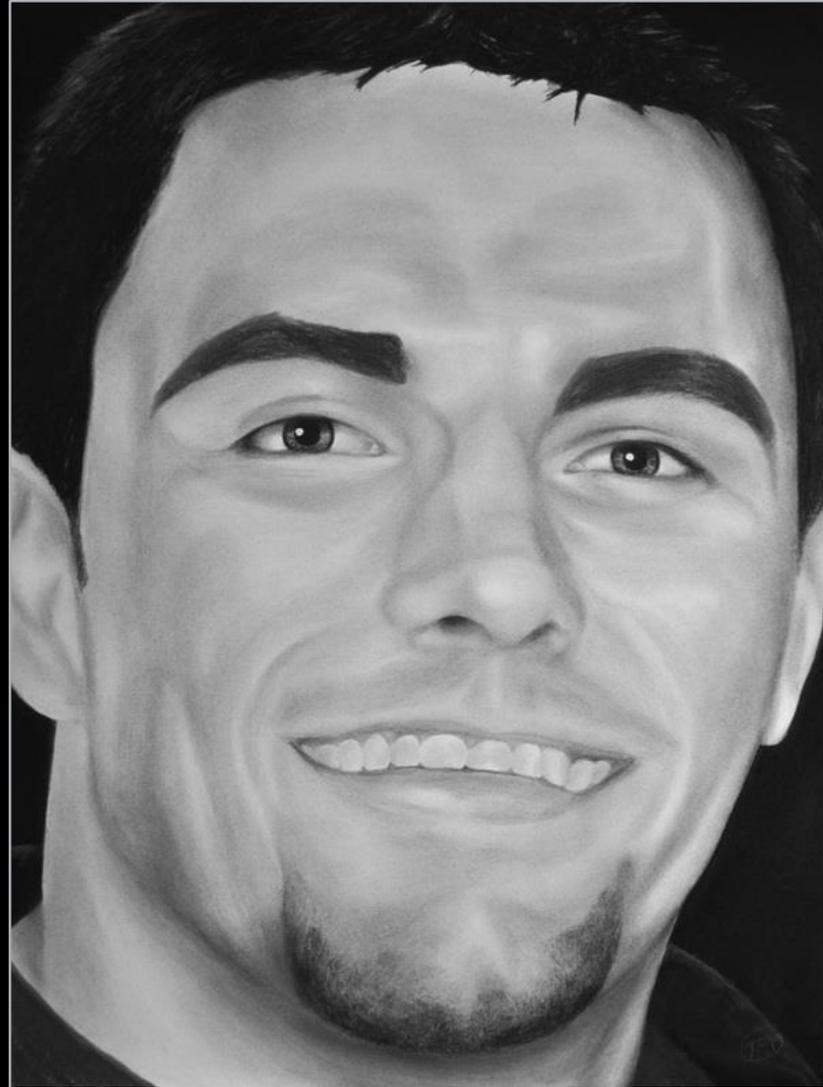
Justin

A very happy, outgoing person who had no enemies and knew no strangers, Justin Eshelman loved to share everything he learned with anyone that would listen. His grandmother said "he just has so much to say." He loved school, his close friends, and really – anyone he came into contact with. He excelled at everything he did, including soccer and theatre. His desire to make people happy fueled him; but, he once talked with a friend about "wearing a mask and putting on a good face". There was no warning before Justin chose to take his own life. He was moody the weekend before October 8th, 2012...but he was a teenager, so that seemed perfectly normal. He was almost 14 years old.



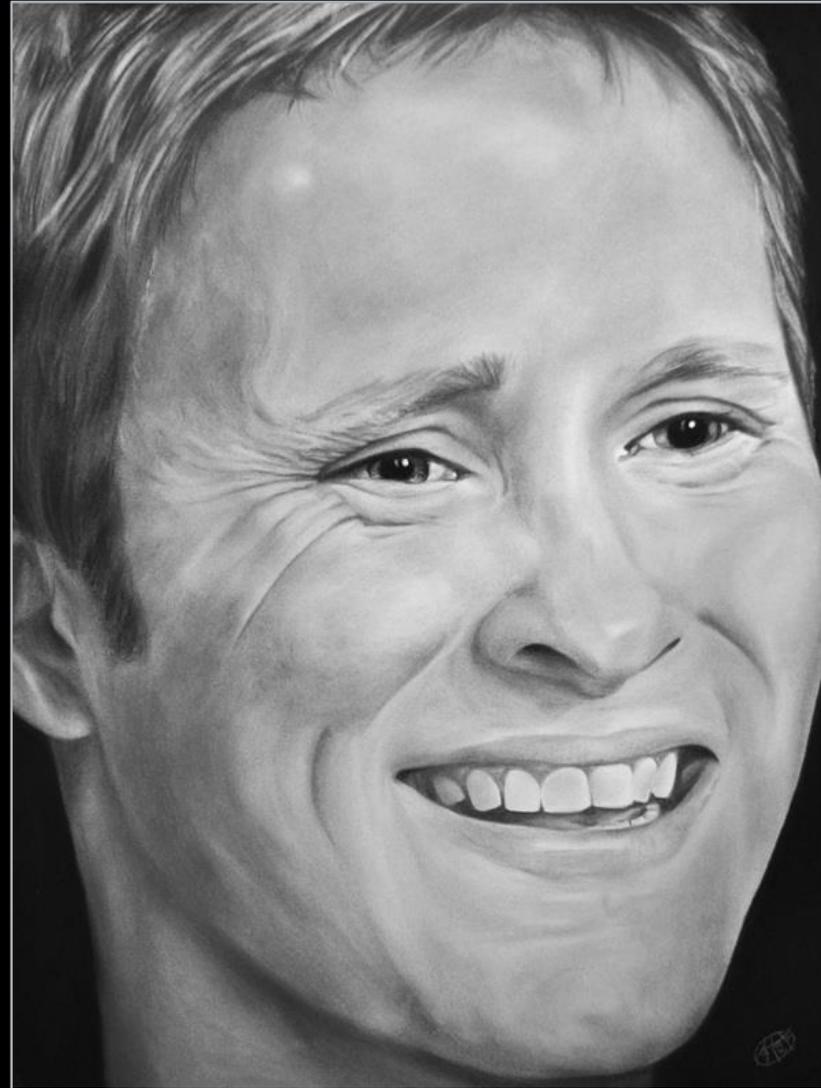
Jesse

A talented athlete who was full of life, everyone loved to be around him. Jestin "Jesse" Riach-Kearsley was always the funniest person around, he was a natural comedian who was very devoted to his family. He got a full ride scholarship to play football at Southern Utah University. It was hard moving away from his family but his college education was very important to him. He married his high school sweetheart but later fell into depression. January 3rd, 2010 Jesse took his life at 21 years old. He would have graduated from college that May.



Jeret

A ball of energy who went all in to everything he did, his tender spirit allowed him to befriend anyone. Jeret "Speedy" Peterson was always able to entertain himself and others...he was always the first to introduce himself to the new kid in school and was a protector of those who were picked on...but the smile was a mask. He once told Men's Journal magazine "things have been going wrong for me since the day I was born." He was in counseling, and even had prescriptions to help, but he didn't know what prescriptions he could use while competing as a Freestyle Skier. The stress of Olympic athletics is hard on anyone, often causing depression and let down after the season is over. Along with this, Jeret was fighting other demons on a consistent basis, including witnessing the suicide of a friend. He couldn't sleep at night because that was all he could see. He just couldn't get away from the pain of all his experiences and on July 25, 2011, at the age of 29, Jeret took his own life. His family has created The Speedy Foundation to support education, outreach and to educate young athletes and their peers as well as engage advocacy groups to increase awareness of mental illness and suicide prevention.



Kat

A very talented, happy, and fun loving girl – on the outside. Kathryn “Kat” Bickman was loved by everyone and was there to help anyone that was having a problem. She could always make her friends smile and laugh, no matter what they were going through. Music, singing and dancing was her life...and you could always tell how she was feeling by the music she was listening to. Her moods would change several times a day. She always said “momma, I just want to be normal.” At age 15, Kathryn was put on medication by her counselor for depression, she hated the meds and overdosed at age 16...and was never the same after that. She had much more anger and anxiety after that but was afraid to take medication. She always thought she was a loser and would be forgotten if she died. She was very wrong! Kat ended her life June 23, 2013 at the age of 22.



Peter

A unique, delicate, loving and private man. It took time for him to open up to someone, but once he did, he had so many stories to share. Peter Wollheim managed a local suicide hotline for 15 years. He dedicated his adult life to bringing the Suicide Prevention Action Network to Idaho, he longed to help others with their struggles, even becoming a mental health counselor at Boise State (where he had taught Communications for years). He volunteered at the hospital as a "cuddler", holding babies that needed comforting, but he had no way to comfort himself. He was the son of Holocaust survivors. The stories that his parents shared with him during his childhood haunted his dreams. Peter never liked asking for help...although he knew the importance of it and he couldn't live in fear anymore. On July 21, 2015 our friend Peter took his own life at the age of 67.



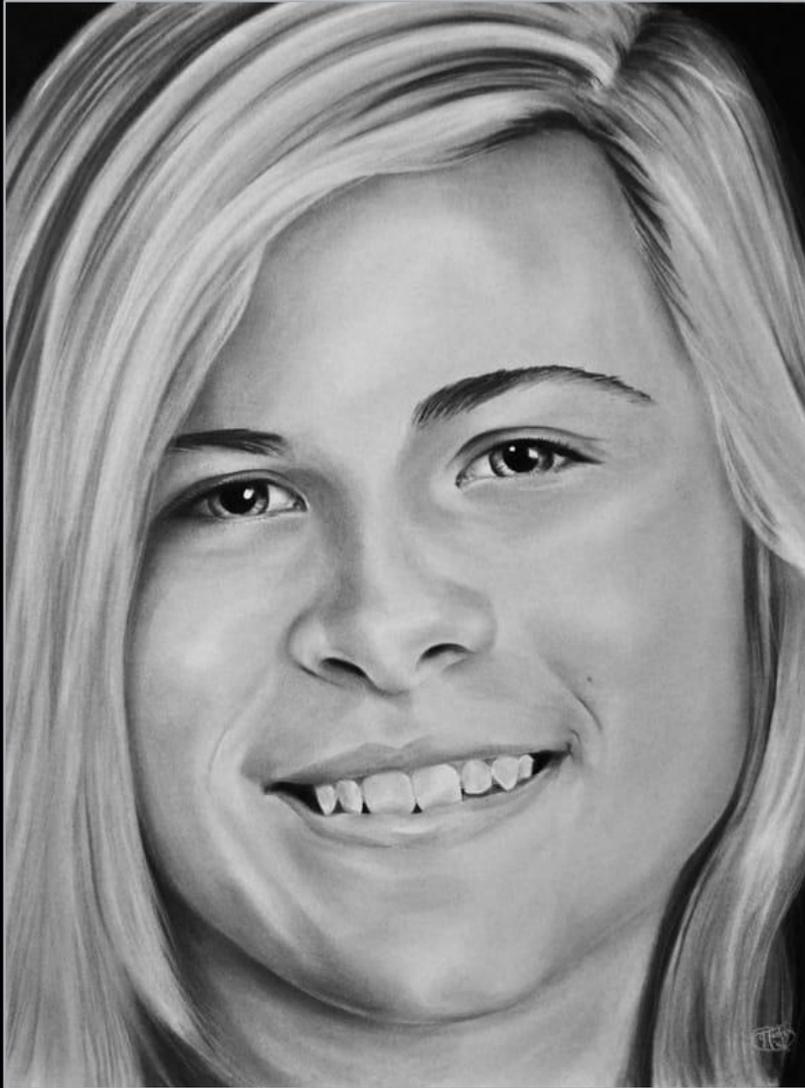
Cam

A loving person who only wanted to make people smile, so he could smile. Cameron "Cam" Wilder would go door to door when in a new neighborhood and locate every other kid that lived there. No one was ever excluded from his circle of friends. He loved baseball, and the stage. His beautiful voice, and acting skills, warmed the hearts of all who were fortunate enough to witness him. His sense of humor always entertained others but under the laughter hid depression. He wanted people to treat each other as equals, to live their life to the fullest, dream big, hug each other, and make someone smile every day. Cam had two speeds: wide open and stop. He did not long for this outcome, but he couldn't disguise his pain any longer. At the age of 17, on September 8, 2013, Cam took his life. His family has created the LiveWilder Foundation to change people's thinking and eliminate stigma that surrounds mental illness. It is a disease. A disease that needs to be treated like any other disease. It's time to talk about suicide.



Maddie

A beautiful, extraordinary girl with big goals, she was a champion trap shooter, a bodybuilder, the favorite cousin and an artist. Maddie Stanger-Hollifield's greatest gift was her ability to share her love, joy and kindness with others. She gave the most amazing bear hugs in the world. You never walked away from her, even having just met her, without a hug. She had the biggest heart, always standing up for the underdog. She had a huge spot in her heart for homeless people or those who were struggling, often buying food, or coffee to give them. Maddie lost her life to a completed suicide on February 18, 2014. Many of Maddie's family members and close friends suspect this was related in large part to the irreparable emotional damage from being bullied. Maddie's family and friends started Maddie's Difference. Their mission is to support and promote youth, parent and community anti-bully and teen suicide prevention awareness, education and training.



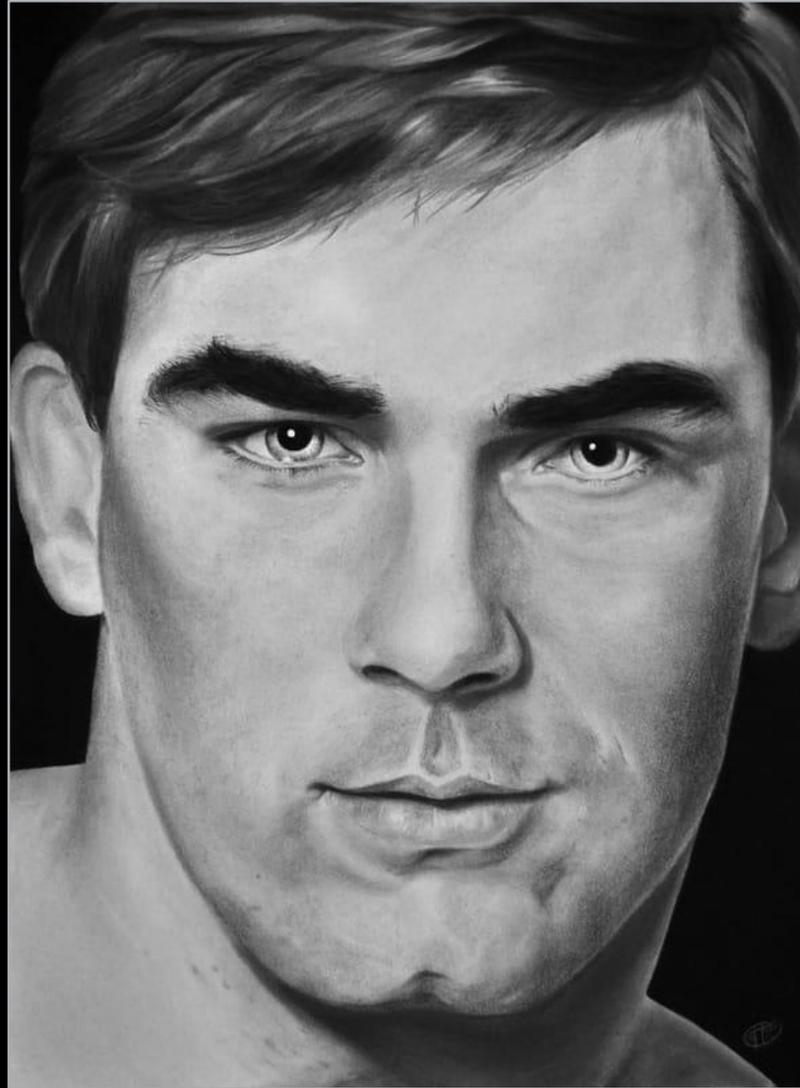
Lynne

A very giving person, who strove to please everyone she could. Lynne Marie Sporea-Wise lived an active life, enhancing the lives of those around her. She believed everyone had a story and she would often visit the homeless to hear theirs. She loved to work, travel and surround herself with people as well as spending time alone watching the ocean along the coast. Lynn was a sensitive person and took many things to heart. On May 23, 2009, her spirit was broken beyond repair by a bully that said incomprehensible things to her. On May 25th, at the age of 22, she ended her life. She is deeply loved and missed.



Monte

A giving person with a quick sense of humor that could make his sister laugh in dark times. Monte Widenhouse worked with children because he had a rough childhood and wanted to make a difference in the lives of "his" kids. He would tend a hurt animal with loving hands and give his last dollar to a needy person. But, Monte was bipolar and fought demons a long, long time. He began to self-medicate and eventually his world collapsed. Monte had spent his life reaching out to those in need and prevented many suicides in young adults by using humor to provide hope. When his darkest hour came, his humor had long been drained. On his 35th birthday, March 1st, 1987 Monte ended his life.



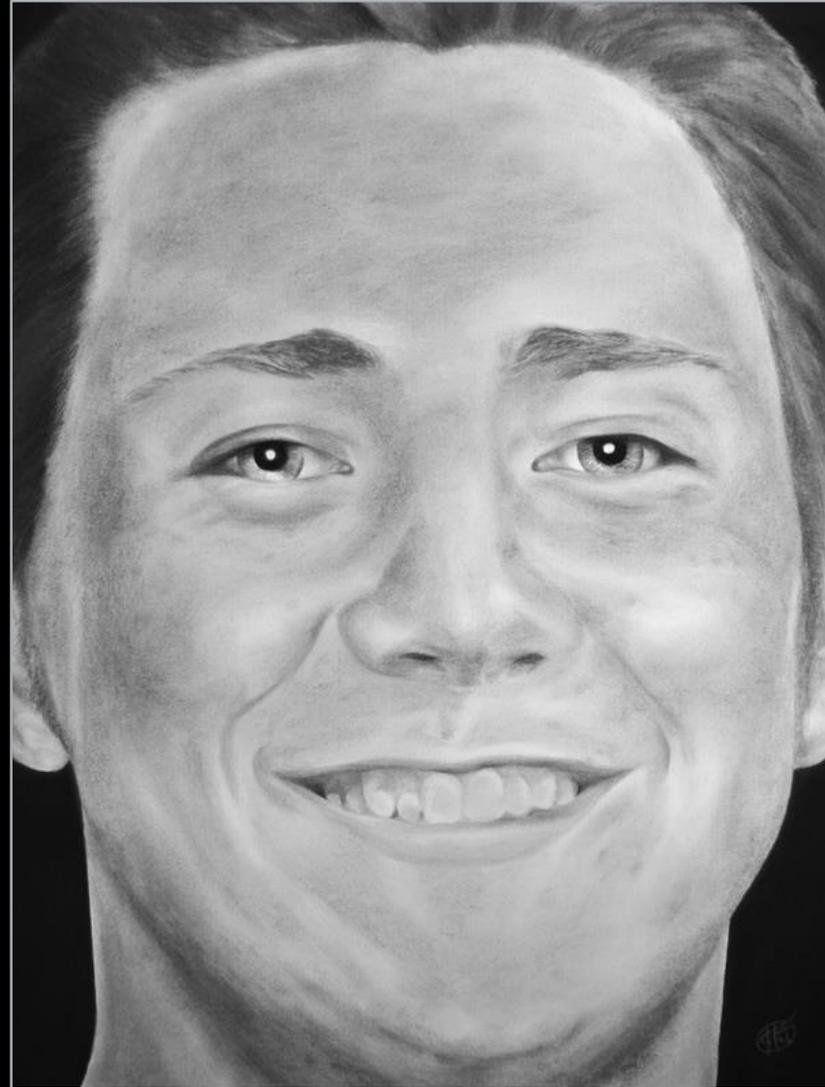
Lacey

Mental health is in the attitude. There's no one better to show how to overcome what life throws at you than Lacey. Diagnosed with Down's Syndrome, Lacey would get frustrated when she couldn't do the things her older sisters were doing. As she got older, she began to make her own goals and work hard to achieve all of them. Lacey was mainstreamed in school and maintains a 3.5 GPA. She has a lot of friends and is known by many people no matter where they go. Because of her upbeat attitude and determination, suicide has never crossed her mind. But, she has not had an easy road. Lacey has struggled with health issues all of her life. She was born with Tetralogy of Fallot, a heart defect, that led to surgery at six months old in order to repair it. She has had over fifteen surgeries but always comes out smiling and better than before. This has not slowed her down. Lacey has been a cheerleader for over seven years and is very active in the Special Olympics competing in Swim, Bowling and Track & Field. She even qualified for the US Special Olympics games in 2018. I hope you will let Lacey's smile infect your heart so that you can walk away with joy. Lacey knows she has Down's Syndrome and is very proud of what that means and who she is. May we all learn from her and be proud of who we are.



Joey

A beautiful soul that loved life, loved the beauty of a sunny day and loved a good campfire. Joseph "Joey" Vanwinkle enjoyed music, hunting and his family's cottage where he was constantly surrounded by a loving family. He said "I love you" every day. He was an entertainer with a hilarious personality. He lit up any room he walked in and could make people laugh just by laughing...he would even laugh at his own laugh. But, inside, Joey suffered from anxiety; but he rarely showed outward signs of difficulty in daily life. He was a typical teen that mentioned suicide once in his life. His family had no idea and really, no warning. Joey took his life September 23, 2013. He was only 19 years old.



Kait

When Kait was little she was very adventurous and confident. She began to doubt herself after her biological father decided to terminate his parental rights. She had a new dad, who cared tremendously for her, but she always felt that she would do something wrong and make him leave too. Then, a whole new range of issues came when she moved to a new school in the seventh grade. Kids began bullying her, calling her horrible names. She began to try to change how she looked to fit in with the popular kids, wanting to wear makeup (which her parents would not allow at that young age) and clothes that were not parent approved. This resulted in a lot of conflict at home. Eventually, her parents decided it was best to transfer her to a different school for eighth grade. This was a huge blessing (even though she hated her parents at the time for making her leave her friends). Kuna schools were a great fit for her. She was soon happy and did not have the issues of bullying like she had at her old school. She met the love of her life, but went through bouts of uncertainty – expecting him to leave her when she did something wrong. Now, they are married and she continues to work on her self-confidence. She has reconnected with her biological father, just to see why he left. She no longer feels like the men in her life are going to leave her the moment she does something wrong. She has learned to love herself and it shows in her daily activities. Today she is a successful real estate agent for Amherst Madison Legacy and was nominated as a Woman of the Year Candidate at age 20.



LaTasha

A child of a drug addict, LaTasha was always the new kid, attending 13 different elementary schools. It was impossible to make good friends and the kids would call her stupid names that made her very self-conscious. By high school, the bullying was beyond belief. The guys at school would date her, but then dump her when she wouldn't have sex with them. They then spread rumors that she was easy and "bad in bed". With a false reputation of a slut, no one would talk to her. She sat alone at lunch with insults constantly thrown her way. In tenth grade, she stopped going to school. She used her mother's illness as an excuse, but it was really because of the bullying. At age 18, LaTasha thought she had found love. She got married, but he turned out to be emotionally abusive, constantly telling her she was fat and stupid. This led to even more feelings of worthlessness and LaTasha began cutting herself. The marriage ended after only one year. With her GED completed, LaTasha joined the Army. Before she left for Basic Training, she was dating her best friend, her biggest supporter, a young man she had known her whole life (they had bathed together as babies). He knew her better than anyone and still loved her; she thought he was the one she would be with for the rest of her life. Tragically, in 2012, he ended his life. This devastated LaTasha and still hurts deeply, causing her to cry every time she talks about him. Today she is doing much better and has not self-harmed in over a year. She is absolutely beautiful, even doing some modeling which is how she met Jessica Tookey, but she still struggles with self-image. She is trying to take care of herself and give her two daughters a strong sense of self-worth. She doesn't want them to feel like she has. Being a good mom is her biggest goal. As a single parent, it is a struggle, but LaTasha is successful and living each day to the fullest.



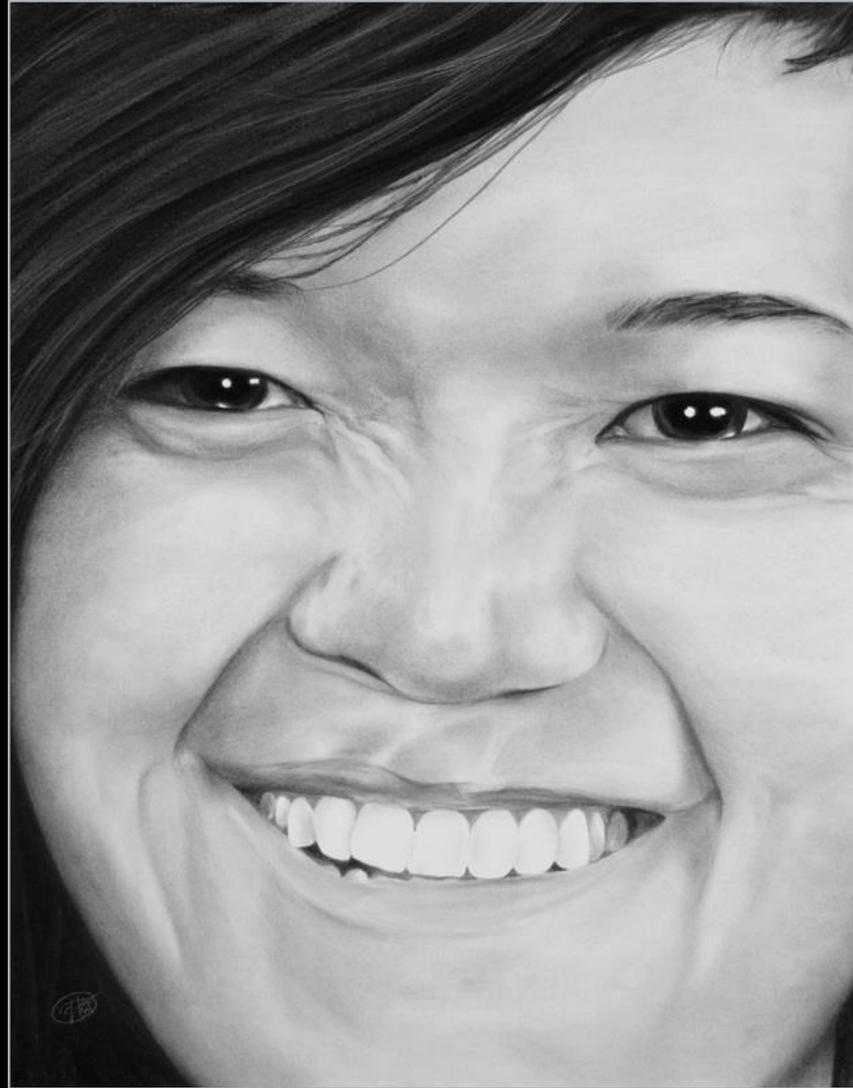
Emily

Emily was always overshadowed and protected by her twin brother. In second grade, they were separated for the first time when the school put them in two different classrooms. Emily really struggled. She was very shy and would get picked on for being so quiet. She had a teacher that yelled a lot and she hated school. Her father said they lived right across the parking lot from the school. He remembers watching her walk to school with her little lunchbox and backpack, head down, shoulders slumped-like she was going to her doom. It was a bad situation. Halfway through the semester, they transferred her into another class but it took a long time to get over that awful experience. School was never easy for her. It wasn't until the 8th grade that her mom challenged her to get all A's, and if she did she'd get an iPod. She did it and that success gave her the confidence she needed to be successful. On top of the shyness, Emily was bullied because of her weight, a lifelong struggle. She has now come to terms with who she is. Although the struggles were miserable, she learned to work hard and persevere and now she's reaping the dividends of those lessons learned. She has a hard time making friends because she is so shy. She has a very small circle of friends, but the friends she has are rock solid.



Rachel

Born with a cleft palate, Rachel was abandoned by her birth family. She was considered “garbage” by her culture in China. Her teachers and classmates bullied her, constantly telling her she was trash. She lived partly in the orphanage and partly with a Chinese foster family where she was treated more as a servant than a member of the family. The father was tragically killed in an accident and Rachel had to return to the orphanage full time. In China, once you are 14 it is actually illegal to be adopted internationally. At that point, children are trained or educated for work. Thankfully, the day before her 14th birthday, she was adopted by a family stationed in England. She was surprised, she really thought her chances of being adopted where over. It was such a joy; however, things were difficult at first because of the language barrier. She spoke no English and her new family did not speak Chinese. At dinner, they’d all be sitting around the table laughing and she would get very upset because she didn’t understand. She would go for walks in the yard and talk to herself in Chinese until she calmed down. Rachel loves to talk so she picked it up faster than others might have. Her positive attitude and contagious smile is a tremendous blessing to all who meet her. If you meet her, be prepared to listen, she has a lot to say.



Taylor

Taylor has struggled most of his life because he didn't feel he fit in. He struggled to be true to himself because what he wanted was not accepted. In high school, he was bullied by teachers and classmates because he is gay. This led to major depression and self-destructive behaviors. From drugs and alcohol to cutting and attempted suicide, it is really a miracle that Taylor is still with us today. He could always count on his sweet sister Katie. They would call each other anytime they were struggling. In 2016, Taylor was devastated when Katie ended her life. This pushed Taylor to the edge but thankfully he was not successful in ending his. He still struggles, and is trying to stay sober and healthy. He has joined forces with Jessica Tookey, doing hair and fashion for the annual Words Matter event. Today he is running his own salon and speaking out for suicide prevention. He works to take care of himself, and hopes to continue to make a difference in people's lives.



Madie

Madie lost people she thought were her friends because they bullied her about her freckles. Even though her mom always told her that her freckles were “kisses from angels,” Madie fell into depression because of the things people said about her. She was put on antidepressants and sent to a counselor but was very uncomfortable in the counselor’s office. After about a month on the prescriptions, Madie’s mindset began to change and she stopped worrying about what other people thought of her. She also realized that there is never a need to be rude or angry and she stopped fighting with the people she loved. Eventually, she even learned to just brush off what people said without holding a grudge and without letting their words change how she felt about herself. Madie has since gotten off the medication and discovered that continuing all the changes is fully her decision. She realized that she just had to change her mindset in order to “not give a crap” about what people said to her. She now fills her life with love and easiness instead of conflict and hate. Madie advocates that society needs to stop taking the easy way out by just medicating those diagnosed with mental illness. Instead, we need to dig to the root of the problem and get people the actual help that they need. Going through this, she has found a love for psychology. She loves learning everything about the brain, personalities and behavior because she has experienced how to make changes in her life. She wants to help others discover their own strengths and improve their mental health. She is currently in college enjoying sorority life and majoring in Psychology with a minor in Sociology.



Becca

When Becca first started developing strong feelings of depression and anxiety she didn't understand it and didn't know how to handle it. At age 13 she began doing drugs. At the time, a skewed reality made more sense than her "normal" behavior. Scars from self-inflicted lacerations and burns cover her body. She hated herself. In high school, Becca was diagnosed Bipolar with abandonment issues and separation anxiety (a result of her mother leaving and her birth father giving her up for adoption). Finally, everything started to make more sense. She still self-harmed for a long time and often skipped her medication, which made things worse. Then, bullying became extreme. Everything was confusing and the bullying made it unbearable. Her family put her on official suicide watch. It wasn't until she saw her birth father, for the first time in 14 years, that she started to feel better again. He also had bipolar disorder. He was happy and in love with a great woman, which Becca had always worried about. She wondered, "who would love someone so erratic, unreliable and impulsive?" However, she didn't fully start to feel better until she changed her mind set. For years, she thought "I AM bipolar." She identified herself as her mental illness. She realizes now that she is a young woman with goals, love and experiences who happens to HAVE bipolar disorder. She is not made up of it. It is not her as a whole. Becca has not self-harmed since 2012, she takes her medication regularly and feels better than she has in years.

