

OVERTURE

I have been an admirer of the work being done by POPS the Club since its inception 12 years ago. A couple of years ago, I finally found the time to volunteer as a classroom facilitator for the POPS and PATHfinder Clubs after quitting my job to pursue a long-sought-after dream, a writing career.

There is a moment that stands out to me from my time as a facilitator at New Village Girls Academy in Los Angeles, a moment I have replayed in my head over and over. The girls were halfway through their favorite weekly Subway tuna sandwiches (to this day my car still faintly smells like tuna). I was feeling restless and wanted to get the writing going. I began to recite the prompt of the week: “Write about a food or a meal you had that reminds you of a certain time in your life. Taste the moment and write down everything you remember.” The girls blinked back at me. A sea of perfectly lined dark brown eyes, not so different from my own.

By that point, I had begun to connect with the girls on a surface level, asking questions about what YouTube videos they were watching on their phones or chiming in about the latest blockbuster we all happened to watch over the weekend. But this moment felt different. Instead of giving them a superficial example from my own life, I felt compelled to be earnest. I told them that my childhood memory meal was Wonder Bread with

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Prego tomato sauce from a jar, both purchased with coupons my father gently clipped each Sunday from the *Los Angeles Times*.

One of the girls raised her hand and asked point blank, “Were you poor?” I blinked back, stunned by her earnestness. I took a moment to collect myself and said, “Yes, we were.” A sentiment I rarely utter in my own life, let alone in front of an audience of teenage girls. The room fell silent. The girls began to write. And the work they produced that day was incendiary.

This level of honesty. This freedom of expression is what programs like The PATHfinder and POPS Clubs are all about. They remind us of where we come from. In fact, the reason I can even call myself a writer today is because of the support and guidance of POPS the Club’s cofounder and my former high school English teacher, Dennis Danziger. My first-ever published piece was on a blog website Danziger ran called *The Mad as Hell Club*. As a young artist, it meant everything to me to have my voice, my work, published.

Teenagers need someone to believe in them. Someone to listen. They need a secret chord they can play to summon their creativity and connect with others. The PATHfinder and POPS Club meetings provide such spaces of safety and connection. A community space where they can be witnessed and allowed to express themselves more fully through art, meditation, creative writing, and the opportunity to hear stories from special guests. This anthology is a perfect representation of the secret chord played within the classrooms of POPS and PATHfinder Clubs across the country. A chorus of heartfelt voices.

Diana Ruzova

Author, Club Facilitator, and Teaching Artist

PART ONE

THE BEAT



"A Secret Chord," Litzy Valencia

YOUTH VOICES!

LIZZ BELLA

Seeing my PATHfinder Club friends' work published was uplifting and inspiring in a youthful way. It was a statement to everyone that YOUTH can and will have a voice! So many of my friends published amazing pieces, and I have so many memories attached to their creations!



"Sunflower," Tasha Edwards

POPS MEANING/MY MEANING

JOHN BEMBRY

First came Venice.
Then came me.
On probation at the
age of 15.

Next came POPS, then
came Hope.
My dreams I knew
then to never Let Go.

The things I saw, the
way I was treated.
It changed my
perspective, and
gave my life a whole
new meaning.

Never forget, from
back of the class,
Fighting demons as
we talk, excuse me if
I smile and I laugh.

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It's okay to judge me, I
love everything and
everyone.

You probably wouldn't believe me,
Until you understand a bit
from where I come.

Never had real love,
lost a lot of what I
thought were real
friends.

I still say this today
as I said back then.

"Who knows where I would be
if POPS didn't step in."

A victim to the
system, a suspect in
my skin.

All the things in a day
I overcome trying to
live.

You can hear in my
words the growth
and the wisdom.

Death isn't easy. I
ALWAYS will miss
them.

A SECRET CHORD

To change people's
lives, that's all that I
wanted,
With POPS I feel
loved, without I feel
haunted.

My emotions and
feelings are always
honest and deep.
A Scorpio born
November 18th.

When our heart is
set on something,
we never hold back.
Until I can do more,
my music and writing
are how I give back.

Hope I touch your
heart and you're excited
to see me.
Hope you want to be
around even though
you don't need me.

Always hoped they
saw the love I have
to give.

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Remember my name
before I die
and don't forget.

John Bembry, Artist
Name
SteezoThePlotter
Always plan ahead
cause every day it
gets harder.

Learned to turn
words into Art. I
could go on forever.
Once we get POPS in
every school around
the world, help it go
on forever.

To be an Author, I
feel loved, praised,
and acknowledged.
To be a better person until the end I
promise.

Thank you, POPS!
The Passionate Loner



"Perspective, Portugal," Hailey Garcia Garcia



"Perspective, Portugal 2," Hailey Garcia Garcia

PREOCCUPATION

CHEYENNE

I think my soul can talk when it's
not preoccupied with a soulmate.

BEHIND BARS

HARDOCEAN

Too young to understand why Daddy's not around,
too young to understand the pain that led to internal warfare,
blocking out sound.

Too young to understand the consequences of Mommy's actions
and why it happened.

Too young to understand redemption is for all,
and forgiveness comes from acknowledgment,
acknowledging all involved,
that we're all doing time,
that we all sit behind bars praying for a sign.

Too young to deal with odd air,
from the side eye glance to the questionnaires . . .

THE BEAT

the when, why, what, how . . .

Where is Daddy, can I see him now?

Too young to understand why we can't go

on that road-trip visit that parents and guardians try to shield
from those

loved and lost, the pain that surrounds,
those cold tables families gather 'round.

Trying to make halves whole in thirty minutes,
the alarm sounds,

taking the warmth created from those round-table events, that
only once in a blue moon some get.

To understand with knowledge comes wisdom,
to understand with forgiveness, you can live again,
takes a maturity God can give,
to help sift through the pain of youth
while providing love and truth,
to all involved, redemption healing the scars.

Deeply needed,

because we all do the time when our loved ones go

-Behind Bars-



"Behind Bars," HardOcean

MY FEELINGS!

BRADYNN DONOVAN

My experience with The PATHfinder Club is short right now, but it will keep growing. I didn't have a submission for the book published in 2023 called *Advice to 9th Graders*, but I find it so amazing that people in The PATHfinder Club truly listen to my voice and share my voice with the world. It's a beautiful thing in life when people are recognized for any of their amazing talents, and I am thankful for everyone brave enough to share their beautiful work. And to those who helped make our dreams come true . . .

This is the start of something beautiful!



"Nature's Cascade," Hailey Garcia Garcia

RUNNING THOUGHTS

TYLER STONEBRAKER

It's been years since I have been as happy as I am right now. During the summer I got to spend time with my grandma. I haven't seen her in years! Seeing her felt good, and so did working on her lawn!

I have so many wishes for my community. I want to see more grocery stores. And I wish there were more opportunities to receive free clothes, shoes, and food! I WISH there was a church in my neighborhood where I could go to spend quality time!

And keep feeling happy . . .

PAST AND FUTURE

CHEYENNE

My future liked me better when I was my past self

My past likes me better as my future self

Do I have the right to say I've outgrown anything if I keep going back to everything?

THE LAST TIME I FELT FREE

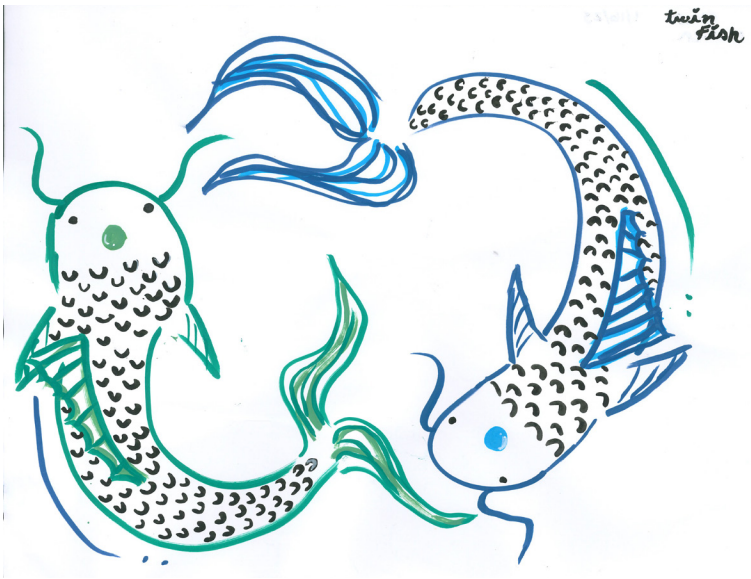
GHOST MULLEN

I haven't been free since my mom asked for my tooth fairy
money for gas. By then I knew I had responsibilities I
hadn't even heard of.

From riding my bike to getting my permit in my freshman year.
From playing outside at night to being afraid to ride the bus
home.

From endless time playing with Barbies to endless hours job-
searching just to give up and stare at the ceiling.

Maybe I was never truly free. Maybe I was just ignorant.
But back then, I felt the breeze in my wings.



"Twin Fish," Ghost Mullen

DREAMS OF THE FUTURE

BRADYNN DONOVAN

My dream future is to be free. To be able to do what I want when I want. I want to learn about myself and live my life to the fullest. I've always wanted to have a family, mainly to have kids. I want to be a mom. I want to be someone's support system, someone they can turn to no matter what. I never want someone to feel judged around me.

My future dream is to be there for people, to help people. I want to be a place people can come to. My dream is to be a solid support system. To make this happen I must take it day by day. I want to learn more about myself and make sure I take care of myself and take care of others.

Honestly, my dream for my future is to be able to help as many people as possible. I want to be a social worker focusing on early childhood development, as it is so important to know everyone is going through something, even if it's small. Learning about others is so important, and I just can't wait to help people have the same opportunity.

Knowing that you aren't alone is so important. Being alone is scary and super hard—I don't want anybody to feel alone.

I want to help, and to make that possible I need to put in the work, learn more, and allow myself to grow.

LOVE ALWAYS WINS

IAN PERKINS

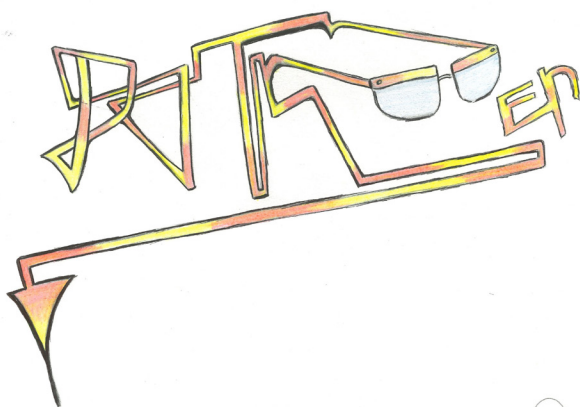
The PATHfinder Club is a safe place for people to come and express their thoughts/feelings, things they are going through, things they have been through, the unknown.

I've been going to Club for about six months, and I've noticed that everyone who comes feels accepted, no matter their color or their age or their race or gender. Everyone who wishes to gets to share their experience.

When I'm in Club, I feel like I can be exactly who I am—the loving, caring, big-hearted individual I am. I feel like I belong to Club, and everyone in the Club is my family.

Love Wins Always.

Love Always Wins.



"Pathfinder," Deon James

SEEN

ARIEL ROBLES

Dark wicked tree
I see myself as.
Tree's arms as long as my own
Roots stronger than my own
Flowers around my surroundings
Orange
Yellow
Green
I see
Making me and you seen.
A dark wicked tree
I've only ever seen
But the closer I tend to lean
The less wicked you tend to be.
I see me in you
You see you in me
We are the same
Just different trees.



*"Wings of Freedom,"
Hailey Garcia Garcia*

THE LAST TIME I FELT FREE

LILI MACIUK

The last time I felt free
I was gazing into the eyes of the sky
The wind blowing gently on my skin
My hands made rough by tiles of the roof
Headphones hugging my head
Bass-boosted vibrations rumbling in my skull
Trees sway as guardians rise
Leaves fall as stories spread
Branches wave as seeds sprout

AT PEACE

KARELY CRUZ SANCHEZ

I don't remember the last time I felt free. My thoughts at night never let me feel free. I'm always up late thinking of someone, something, anything really. I just never feel free.

But I do feel at peace when I'm distracted with friends,
doing things I know I shouldn't be doing . . .

And that feels too good—like I'm at peace.