Stories of Hope

Louisville Book Festival

2026 Anthology

JCPS Student Authors

Make A Way Media

Cover Art by: Symiracle Reed - Iroquois High School “Rooted in Resilience”

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First Edition “Stories of Hope Anthology”

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Rooted in Resilience

Cover Art by: Symiracle Reed

Louisville Book Festival Mission:

The Louisville Book Festival is a 501(c) (3) non-profit organization founded in 2018 to celebrate and promote the love and the benefits of reading, writing, and literacy. We believe that literacy is a fundamental human right and that there is power and purpose in bringing books to life every day of the year. We celebrate books and use them to highlight and grow the resilient culture of our vibrant city, as well as to encourage and elevate our creative thinking as a community.

Introduction

Hope begins with a single story—and in these pages, young voices rise together.

Stories of Hope brings together the brightest storytellers from across the district, each selected by their schools to represent the creativity, resilience, and imagination of today's students. These young authors explore what it means to find light in darkness, courage in uncertainty, and strength in one another.

Inside, you'll discover tales of friendship, triumph, wonder, and the small sparks that make the world brighter. These stories remind us that hope is not one thing—it is many voices, many paths, and many possibilities.

This anthology is a celebration of community, curiosity, and the limitless potential of young writers.

Step into their worlds. Feel their hope. Let their stories inspire your own.

Stories of Hope is a project we at the Louisville Book Festival have poured our hearts into. We want student voices to shine, no matter their age or background. In this publication you will find student voices telling you about hope, love, and so much more.

In this 2026 edition there are winning stories from three of our area schools, as well as some honorable mentions, and one winning art piece chosen from the art submissions. These stories will be published first in our 2027 paperback edition as we hope to have more students and schools participate in coming years.

Best,

Carmen DaVinleam

Please visit the Louisville Book Festival on Saturday, October 24, 2026, from 10am – 5pm at the Kentucky International Convention Center in the heart of downtown Louisville to hear from these amazing student voices as well as our 2026 headlining speaker, and award-winning author, Roxane Gay.

A Note from the Founder

Dear Young Authors,

I have spent much of my life thinking about hope. Writing about it, talking about it, and helping people find it when it feels difficult to see.

And then I read your stories.

In these pages, you reminded me that hope can be found in so many places. It can live in love and friendship, in family and imagination, in difficult moments and new beginnings. Sometimes hope is big and bold. Sometimes it is quiet. Most of the time it is simply believing that something better is still possible.

You wrote with honesty, courage, vulnerability, and heart. You trusted us with your words, and those words changed us.

Today, I hope you understand what you have accomplished: **you are a published author.**

There was a story inside of you that had never existed in the world before. You found the courage to tell it. And now someone you may never meet can hold your words in their hands and be encouraged, comforted, inspired, or reminded that they are not alone.

That is the extraordinary power of a story.

As the founder of the Louisville Book Festival, I dreamed of creating a place where stories could be celebrated and where people could see that their voices belong in the world. *Stories of Hope* is a beautiful part of that dream, and I will forever be grateful that you helped us begin it.

My hope for you is that this will not be the last time you share your voice. Keep writing. Keep imagining. Keep telling the stories only you can tell.

And wherever life takes you, please remember this:

The world needs your story. And there is always a reason to hope.

With love and enormous gratitude,

Deedee Cummings

Founder, Louisville Book Festival

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Redefining Perfect

By: Serena Z.

Iroquois High School ~ Winning Piece ~

My idea of a perfect life has changed more times than I can count. At one point, it meant having both of my parents present. At another, it meant having them completely gone. I don't hate my parents, but I don't forgive them either. I understand they did the best they could, but that doesn't mean it was enough.

From the outside, my life looked normal. I went to school, made friends, and followed routines like everyone else. But behind the scenes, my sisters and I were figuring everything out on our own. We had to cook, help each other with homework, and put ourselves to bed. For a long time, I thought that was normal.

In third grade, I made my first best friend. One day, he told me how his mom helped him with homework and made dinner every night. That was the first time I lied about my home life. I didn't know how to explain

that everything his mom did for him was what I had to do for myself.

By fourth grade, I avoided home whenever I could and stayed with my aunt instead. She wasn't perfect, but she showed up for me. One morning, we chased the sunrise in her broken-down van, laughing as we got stuck in a cul-de-sac. I remember wondering why my mom couldn't be like her.

When my aunt died in fifth grade, everything unraveled. I didn't know how to process the grief, and by sixth grade, I had turned that pain inward. I began self-harming, then developed an eating disorder, losing over 80 pounds by seventh grade. I told myself I was in control, but really, I was just trying to escape.

Then my mom died.

By that point, she felt like a stranger. Watching her overdose filled me with more anger than grief. I couldn't cry. Part of me had already accepted her absence long before she was gone.

After that, I spiraled through unhealthy relationships, bad habits, and denial that I needed help. Eventually, I was sent to an alternative school. That's where things began to change.

For the first time, I took accountability. I stopped looking for escapes and started facing my reality. I turned to structure, reading, and my education. I went from not caring about school to becoming a straight-A student. I

realized that if I wanted a different future, my actions had to reflect that.

Returning to a regular high school wasn't easy. I had to distance myself from people I cared about because I knew I couldn't grow if I stayed the same. Over time, I found healthier ways to cope, such as writing, walking, and learning when to step away before my emotions took over.

I've learned that resilience isn't about becoming perfect. It's about choosing to keep going and taking accountability for who you become.

My life hasn't been perfect. But I've learned how to build something better from what I was given. For the first time, that feels enough.

The Light Bulb

By: Teba Al Rawi

Ballard High School ~ Winning Piece ~

It's a small thing,

A light bulb to the sun.

It climbs up my walls,

Reaching past the posters and vinyls and
shelves

Stretching with the vines and the lights.

It's the toy cars the kids next door play
with,

Running and laughing outside.

It's the ice cubes,

Melting lazily,

Relief in a heatwave.

It's stepping foot in a humble cafe,

Bell jingling and lingering with the perfumed air,

The lady at the counter gesturing me in with a baby *and a* sweetheart.

It's in careful hands carding through tangles in my hair,

Helping me tie my hijab in place.

It's sharing food, watching my tutoring help confidence to bloom,

Yellow dandelion flowers, reading someone's passion come to life on their page,

Finding forgotten candy in abandoned

drawers, the trust in telling someone
my story.

It's jumping gracelessly, unworried,
knowing there's a town of people
waiting to catch me.

It always has a way of pulling me up
when I need it most.

Hope, fleeting and consistent, a paradox.

Teba Al Rawi Bio:

Teba is 15 years old and has been writing for as long as she can remember. The thing she's most passionate about is people and the narratives their lives hold.

One of Them

By: Ruby N.

Western Middle School for
the Arts ~ Winning Piece ~

Because I am not one of them

Doesn't mean I can't speak for them When their voice is clogged to the brim I can speak for the black

For the brown –

For the yellow and red.

Even if my skin is as white as sugar, Smooth as the rivers;

I will speak for the fallen.

For the survivors,

For the future and for the youngs' to come.

Just because I am not one of them, Doesn't mean I can't speak for them, When they are forced into silence.

"You Say I Love You"

By: Izabella Barnes

Iroquois High School
~Honorable Mention~

You say “I love you”
and of course I say it back

But I've been hurt so many times
I no longer hear those three words as
actual love
Anymore
I hear it as a sick way of making people
stay with you
Even if it hurts the most

You know who you are
And while i've never heard of you saying
I love you to anyone
That doesn't mean you’re not twisting
my arm to keep me in your grip

And I HATE it

I hate your smile
I hate the feeling of your lips on mine
I hate how perfect it feels when you
    hold me
I hate the way your head lays on my
    shoulder so fittingly

I hate the way you held me when I cried
I hate your comfortable hugs
I hate your laugh
I hate your beautiful big brown eyes and
    how they linger into mine
And god how I hate the way you say
    please

I hate the way you walk
The way you talk
And I hate you
But what I hate the most

Is that I don't hate you at all
I don't hate your smile
Your laugh
Your touch
The way you hold me

Your hugs or anything

I love it all
And I love you
But I don't want to

So I tell myself everyday that I hate you
I tell you that I hate you
But you see through my lies
And you know I love you
I just wish you didn't.

Untitled

By: Brooklyn Middleton

Ballard High School
~Honorable Mention~

There's a light that doesn't need the sun
a warmth that lives beneath the skin
when everything feels cold and hollow—
That's where hope blooms

It doesn't shout or make demands
doesn't promise easy days ahead
It simply takes your trembling hands
and whispers: *not yet. I'm still here*

Hope is the seed beneath the snow,
the breath you take before you speak
the gentle way you choose to go forward,
even when you're weak

. . .

It isn't blind or foolishly bright
doesn't ignore the weight you bear
It sees the dark, acknowledges the night
then finds one star still burning, hidden away

So when life feels hard and long
when you can't see beyond today
remember—hope's not always blinding
Sometimes it just decides to stay

And staying is enough, you'll find,
to carry you from here to there
a quiet strength within the mind

The Light in Apartment 3B

By: Cody Hazel

Ballard High School
~Honorable Mention~

The light in the hallway outside of the apartment room 3B had been flickering for as long as Maya had been there. It often buzzed very softly, like it was deciding whether to shine or to just give up. Most people just walked by and ignored it. Maya did not.

Every evening when she came home from school, she'd pause under that light. Some days it shone steadily. Other days it had been blinking unevenly, casting shadows along parts of the walls.

Life hasn't been the easiest lately. Her mom worked two jobs, her older brother moved away for college, and the apartment felt quieter than it used to. Maya missed the laughter that used to fill the rooms, the kind that made the place feel alive.

One evening, the light flickered more than it usually did. Maya stood beneath, staring up.

"Wow, you're still trying," she murmured.

The next day, she brought a small step stool from her room and a new bulb her mom had bought weeks ago but never had time to install. The hallway had smelt of faint dust and old paint as Maya carefully climbed up. Her hands were trembling a little– not because it was high but rather because she wasn't sure it would make any difference.

Maya twisted the old bulb out. It gave one last dim flicker before going completely dark.

Then Maya screwed in the new bulb.

Light had flooded the hallway with a steady and bright beam. The shadows disappeared and were replaced with a new warm glow that reached every corner. The walls didn't look so worn out anymore. The space felt alive.

Maya climbed down the stool slowly, staring at what she had done. It wasn't a big thing, she thought. It was just a lightbulb.

But it made a big difference.

That same evening as neighbors walked by, they noticed.

"Looks nice out here," one had said.

"Much better," said another.

Maya smiled quietly to herself with each neighbor's reaction. The hallway didn't feel so lonely anymore.

When she stepped back into Apartment 3B, it didn't

feel as empty. She opened the curtains and let the remaining sunlight flood the room. Then she grabbed her notebook and sat down at her table.

Maybe she can't fix everything all at once. Maybe life would still be hard at times. But like the hallway light, she realized something important.

How I Came to the U.S.A.

By: Anonymous

Western Middle School for the Arts ~Honorable Mention~

My story began in 2023 in Santiago, Chile. My brother, mother and I received humanitarian parole to the US. I didn't know what that was. I thought it was like a trip to another country on vacation.

The day we left, I sat on the swing at my apartment and asked myself ''What's happening?'' My mother is not one of those mothers who doesn't take her child to school and lets them do what they want. I fell off the swing and it left a mark in the middle of my nose. My family and I called it ''the goodbye mark.''

We arrived at the airport. I had never been. It was a serious moment since even my father had come, and my mother doesn't like to see him. In my mind, the image of my father crying is repeated.

It was a long flight to Venezuela. We had to go there because my brother had lost his passport and we had to

get a new one. When we got off the plane, I thought two things: "It's so hot, my God." and "I'm in my happy place." It reminded me of my entire childhood when it was very hot and I played with my cousins and there was the aroma of the bougainvillea flower tree in my house.

I felt happy being in Venezuela. Most of my mother's family were there. We spent 2 months in Venezuela. We left with my stepfather. I said goodbye to everyone. I was sure of something...I did not want to leave.

We made a stopover in the Dominican Republic to get to Miami, where we stayed for a week. It was a long drive from Miami to Kentucky. I slept half the way and I watched a movie with my brother. I went with my stepfather to drop off the car and I was completely amazed to see things I'd never seen before.

I entered school in August. The first day was weird when the teacher was talking and I couldn't understand anything. I didn't talk to anyone until one day during recess a boy approached me. He told me he was from Cuba and asked if I wanted to be his friend. I said yes because the truth is I didn't like being alone.

I liked my science and reading class because there were a lot of Latinos. We called ourselves "The Latin American Club" because we only spoke Spanish and we were all from Latin America. We always hung out together and we got excited about the holidays at school

since all the classes would get together and we could all get together

When I started to speak more English, it was fun. It was also fun when I mixed Spanish with English: Spanglish.

I like the United States, and I don't plan on leaving, but I've not forgotten my past. I still talk to my friends from Chile.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the amazing teachers who signed up to have their students' voices shine. Jason Crawford, Dr. Lisa Carpenter, Ms. Sharonda Holmes, Kari Haney, Karen Morgan, Michelle Livesay, Hannah Hicks, Emily Forrester, Randi Skaggs, and Sarah Yost.

We also want to thank all the students and parents for participating and hope to see more stories and art from everyone next time around.

Special thanks to Deedee Cummings and Allie Jones for encouraging this endeavor, and the entire Louisville Book Festival team of supports and volunteers.

Schools that signed up to participate in the 2026 Stories of Hope Anthology:

Conway
Western Middle School for the Arts
Minor Daniels Academy
Ballard High School
Southern High School
duPont Manual

Brown School

To sign up for updates about the upcoming editions, use the link or scan the QR code:

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