



**SPRING 2026**

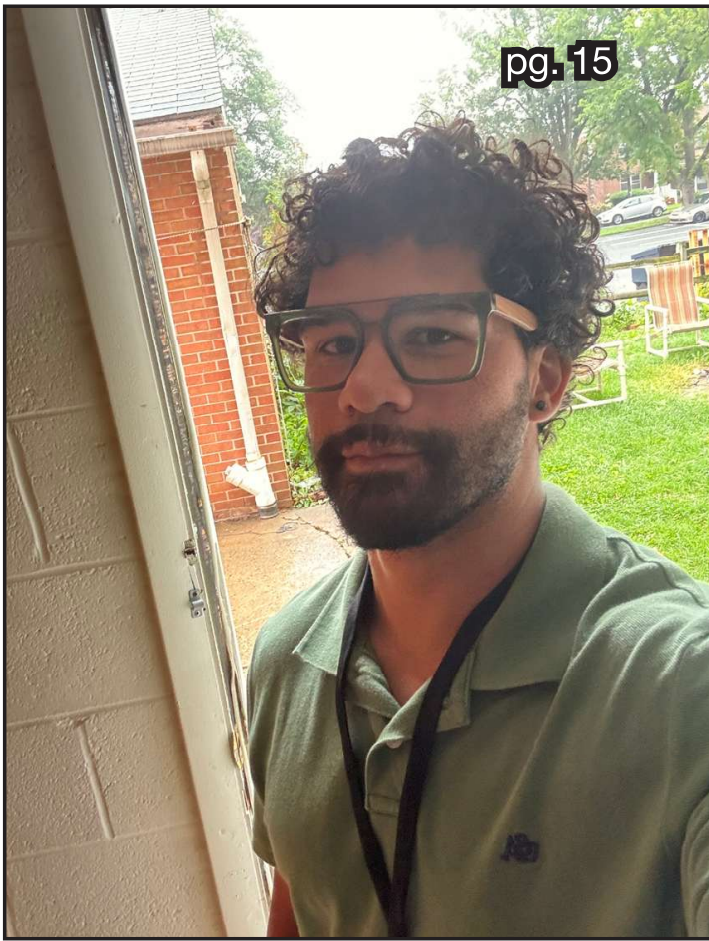
**TechTalk**



LANCASTER COUNTY  
**CAREER & TECHNOLOGY**  
CENTER

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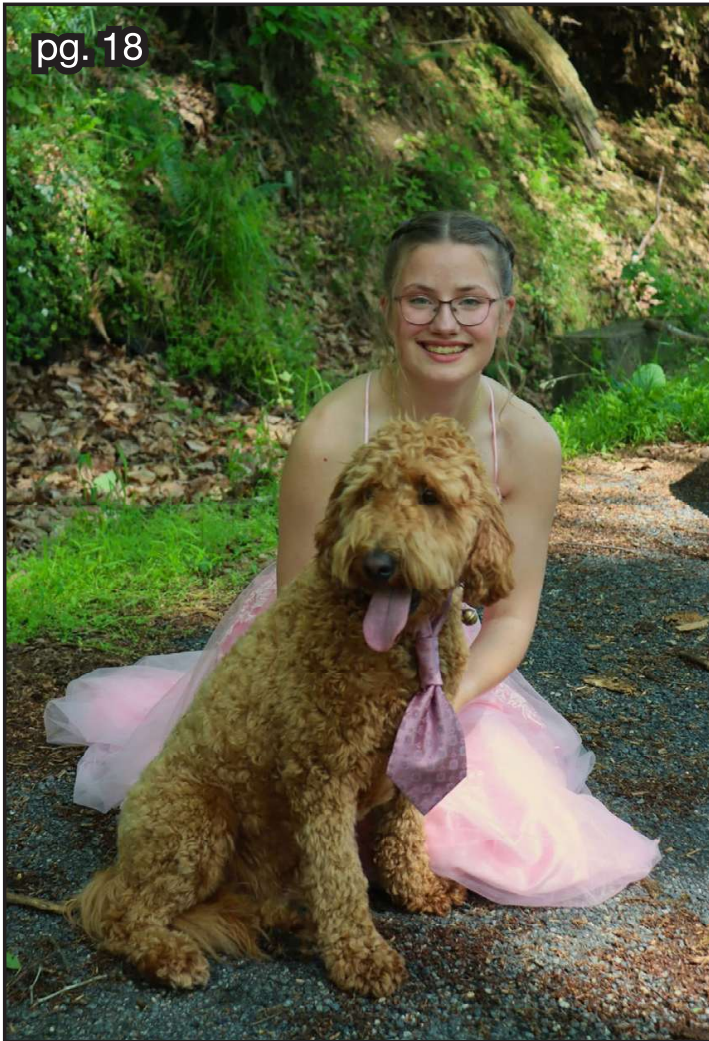


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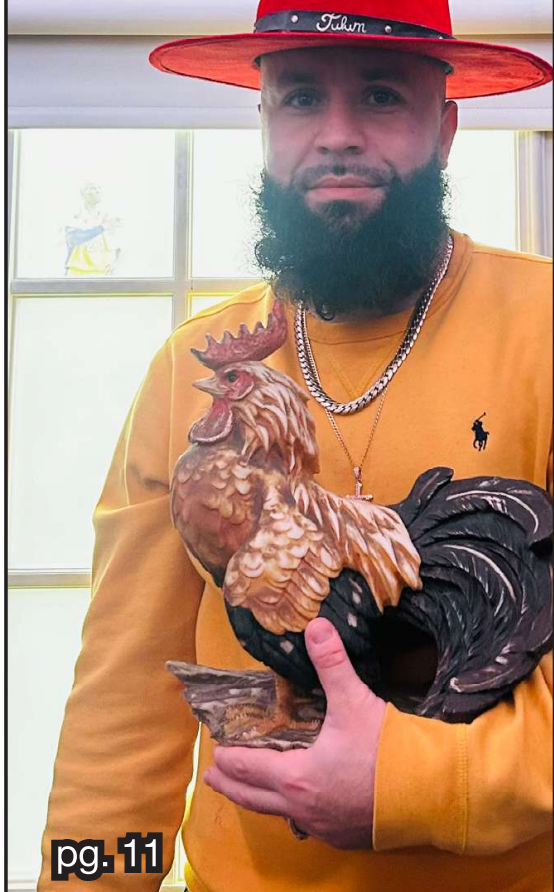
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# The Fish That Got Everything Else

By Rylee Rolfes

Fishing trips come in two kinds: the ones where you catch fish, and the ones where you catch stories. My uncle Ray insists there is a third category—“character-building experiences”—but those are just the second kind wearing a nicer hat.

The trip I am about to describe wore three hats, a poncho, and at one point a traffic cone, and by the end of it we had caught everything except fish.

We left before sunrise, the traditional way to prove to the fish you are serious about not sleeping. Uncle Ray arrived in his truck at 4:59 a.m., honking like a goose with a caffeine problem. I stumbled outside with one boot on and one philosophical objection to mornings. Ray grinned through a mustache that seemed to have its own zip code.

“You ready?” he asked.

“Define ready,” I said.

“Alive and able to hold a rod,” he said, which, as definitions go, felt like a low bar I could clear.

We loaded the gear: rods, reels, a cooler full of sandwiches, a cooler full of optimism, and a mysterious tackle box labeled “Do Not Open (Seriously).”

I made the mistake of asking what was inside.

“Memories,” Ray said.

This should have been my first clue to go back to bed.

The lake was a mirror when we arrived, the kind of calm surface that makes you whisper as if the water might wake up and ask you to keep it down. A thin mist hovered over it, and the dock creaked like it had opinions about our life choices.

We pushed off in Ray’s aluminum boat, which had a name—“Unsinkable II”—that raised several questions about the fate of Unsinkable I.

“It was a misunderstanding,” Ray said when I asked.

“With physics?” I said.

“With optimism,” he said.

We motored out to what Ray called “the honey hole,” which sounded both delicious and vaguely alarming. He cut the engine, and we drifted. Birds chirped. A fish jumped somewhere far enough away to be insulting.

“All right,” Ray said, clapping his hands. “Today’s the day. I can

feel it in my elbows.”

I have never trusted elbows as a forecasting tool, but I nodded. We baited our hooks—worms that looked at us with the resigned expressions of employees on a Monday—and cast our lines.

There is a particular silence that falls over people who are waiting for something to happen. It is a silence full of imagination. Every ripple is a promise, every tug a possibility. We sat there, two statues with snacks, contemplating the philosophical implications of a bobber that refused to bob.

After 10 minutes, Ray said, “You’re not holding your mouth right.”

I adjusted my mouth, which felt like trying to tune a radio with your face.

“Better,” he said. “Fish can tell.”

I wanted to argue that fish probably had other priorities, but before I could, my line jerked.

“I got one!” I shouted.

“Don’t panic,” Ray said, immediately panicking. “Stay calm. Reel slow. No, faster. No, slower than that faster.”

I reeled with the precise confidence of someone who had no idea what they were doing. The rod bent, the line sang, and for one glorious second I imagined myself as a triumphant angler, hoisting a gleaming fish like a trophy.

Then the line snapped.

The rod whipped back, I yelped, and my hat flew off into the lake with a dignity it did not deserve.

“Well,” Ray said. “You almost caught a hat.”

We spent the next 20 minutes trying to retrieve it with a net, a paddle, and eventually a philosophical acceptance of loss. The hat drifted away, free at last, probably to start a new life as a very small boat.

“That fish was big,” Ray said, nodding. “You can tell by the way it got away.”

“That seems like a convenient metric,” I said.

“It’s the only one we’ve got,” he said.

We rebaited and cast again. Time passed. The sun rose higher. The mist burned off, revealing a sky so blue it looked like it had been freshly painted. We ate sandwiches that tasted faintly of bait because someone—Ray—had used the same hand for both activities.

At around 9 a.m., something bumped the boat. We both froze.

“Did you feel that?” I whispered.

“Probably a fish,” Ray whispered back.

The boat bumped again, harder this time.

“That is a very aggressive fish,” I said.

We peered over the side and saw not a fish but a log. A large, determined log that had decided our boat was a social opportunity.

“Ah,” Ray said. “The elusive Wooden Bass.”

The log scraped along the hull with the sound of a chalkboard filing a complaint. We tried to push it away with the paddle, but it clung to us with the enthusiasm of a barnacle that had read a motivational book.

“Go away,” I told the log, which did not respond, because logs are famously uncooperative conversationalists.

Eventually, we dislodged it, and it drifted free, though I had the distinct impression the log would remember us and hold a grudge.

Around noon, the wind picked up. The lake, which had been a mirror, became a wrinkled bedsheet. Our boat rocked, which would have been charming if it had not also been alarming.

“Maybe we should head in,” I suggested.

“Nonsense,” Ray said. “Fish love wind. It confuses them.”

“Are we trying to catch confused fish?” I asked.

“They’re easier to impress,” he said.

We stayed. The wind grew stronger. Waves slapped the boat like it owed them money. My line tangled with Ray’s line, which tangled with the net, which tangled with my sense of dignity.

“Hold still,” Ray said, as if stillness were an option in a small boat being auditioned for a washing machine commercial. We untangled ourselves with the patience of people who had nowhere else to be and no better plan. When we finally cast again, my hook caught something almost immediately.

“I got one!” I said again, with less confidence but more volume.

I reeled carefully, expecting another hat-related tragedy. Instead, I pulled up a... shoe. It was an old sneaker, waterlogged and philosophical.

“Nice catch,” Ray said. “What size?”

“Despair,” I said.

We added the shoe to the boat, because throwing it back felt rude, and also because Ray insisted it might be lucky.

“Lucky for what?” I asked.

“Finding the other one,” he said.

By mid-afternoon, we had assembled an impressive collection: one shoe, half a fishing lure that looked like it had been through a breakup, a stick that Ray claimed had “good energy,” and a sandwich I dropped and immediately regretted.

“We’re diversifying,” Ray said. “Fishing is about more than fish.”

“Then why is it called fishing?” I asked.

“Marketing,” he said.

At some point, clouds rolled in with the dramatic flair of actors who know they are about to deliver a monologue. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

“That sounds close,” I said.

“It’s just saying hello,” Ray said.

Lightning flashed, which felt less like a greeting and more like a warning.

“We should definitely go in,” I said.

“Probably,” Ray agreed, which was his way of saying “eventually, after one more cast.” He cast. I cast. The universe, apparently, cast judgment.

Rain began as a polite suggestion and quickly escalated to a full argument. We scrambled for ponchos, which were stored in the “Do Not Open (Seriously)” tackle box. Inside we found, in addition to ponchos, a rubber chicken, a deck of cards missing all the useful ones, and a traffic cone.

“Memories,” Ray said, as if this explained everything.

We donned the ponchos. I wore the traffic cone briefly, because when you are already soaked and slightly afraid of lightning, you might as well accessorize.

“You look official,” Ray said.

“I’m directing the storm,” I said. “It’s not listening.”

We started the engine and headed toward the dock, rain stinging our faces like tiny, enthusiastic bees. The boat bounced over waves that had upgraded from slaps to full-on lectures. Halfway in, the engine sputtered.

“Don’t you dare,” Ray said to it.

The engine dared. It coughed, sputtered, and died with the theatrical timing of a soap opera character.

We drifted.

“Well,” I said. “This is character-building.”

“We have oars,” Ray said.

We did have oars. We also had wind, rain, and a log somewhere out there with unfinished business. We rowed. Slowly. Determinedly. Like two people in a painting titled “Regret, But With Snacks.”

The dock seemed very far away, which is a trick distance plays when it knows you have places to be. We rowed harder. The storm eased slightly, as if it had made its point and moved on to critique someone else’s day.

Eventually—truly eventually—we reached the dock. We tied up the boat with hands that had forgotten what dry felt like. We stood there for a moment, dripping, breathing, alive.

“We did it,” I said.

“We did something,” Ray agreed.

We loaded the gear back into the truck. The cooler of optimism was lighter now, replaced by a cooler of experience. The mysterious tackle box closed with a click that sounded like a punchline.

As we drove home, the sun broke through the clouds, painting the world in that after-storm glow that makes everything look like it has learned a lesson.

“We didn’t catch any fish,” I said.

Ray nodded. “Nope.”

“But we caught a hat, a shoe, a log, a storm, and possibly a new appreciation for dry land,” I said.

“That’s a full day,” he said.

I looked out the window, watching the lake recede behind us, calm again, as if it had not just tried to rearrange our priorities.

“Same time next week?” Ray asked.

I thought about the early morning, the snapped line, the rebellious hat, the philosophical shoe the dramatic storm, and the undeniable fact that I was already turning it into a story.

“Define next week,” I said.

Ray grinned. “Alive and able to hold a rod.”

And despite everything, that felt like a bar worth clearing.

## **The Bird That Changed My Life**

By Alexis Bridwell

Getting Nathan, my first bird, changed my life. Before him, I never understood how intelligent, emotional, and unique birds could be. Nathan opened a new world filled with trust, companionship, and a deep appreciation for animals. Because of him, my love for birds grew into something that shaped who I am.

I received Nathan from my Nana when I was 11. At the time, Nathan was around 20. I had been babysitting him over Halloween, and during that time, she had just gotten a new dog, and Nathan was spending most of his time alone in his cage. So, Nana decided I should keep him. He did not

get along with many people, but for some reason, he trusted me from the beginning.

When I first met him, I could handle him in ways no one else could. I could ask him to step up onto my finger, pet him gently, and even do more unusual things, like hold him upside down while he ate. I took him on walks and carried him around the house. At one point, I could even place him in my mouth without him being scared.

That level of trust meant everything to me. Nathan taught me birds have strong personalities and deep emotions. He was not just a pet sitting in a cage; he was part of my family.

He reacted differently to different people, showed preferences, and clearly formed bonds. Through him, I realized birds can be just as loving and loyal as dogs or cats—maybe even more so.

Birds make incredible companions because their intelligence and emotional awareness create a special connection.

A few years after getting Nathan, I discovered the Feathered Bird Sanctuary. Volunteering there allowed me to meet many species of birds, each with its own personality. Some were loud and energetic; others were shy and reserved.

Spending time at the sanctuary deepened my love for birds and helped me understand them better. There, I met my second bird, Fred. Fred was much larger than Nathan—almost the size of a small dinosaur—and I instantly fell in love with him. Every weekend, I visited the sanctuary just to see him.

I spent months trying to convince my parents to let me adopt a bird his size.

Before that could happen, however, I experienced one of the hardest moments of my life.

Nathan passed away at 24, right before Christmas. Losing him devastated

me. He had been with me during important years of my childhood, and his absence left a noticeable emptiness in our home. I still miss him. He was not “just a bird.” He was my companion, my comfort, and my friend.

About a year after Nathan passed away, my parents finally agreed to let me adopt Fred. Shortly after Christmas, they surprised me by placing him on the kitchen table for me to find. I will always remember that moment. It felt like a new chapter was beginning—one filled with hope and healing.

A few weeks later, I also welcomed a cockatiel named Pi into my

life. Pi is much quieter than Fred and prefers to keep to himself, but I love him just the same. Each bird brings something different into my life. Nathan changed me in ways I never expected. He taught me responsibility, patience, and the importance of building trust.

He also showed me love can come in unexpected forms— even with feathers and a beak. Because of him, I discovered a passion that continues to grow. I now look forward to making many more memories with Fred and Pi, just as I did with Nathan.

Although losing him was painful, the joy and love he brought into my life will always stay with me.

**ZZZZZZzzzzzzz....**



By Justin Santiago

Many students believe staying up late to study will help them earn better grades. It can feel responsible and productive to sacrifice sleep to finish homework or prepare for a test. However, sleep is not a luxury — the body and brain need adequate sleep.

Sleep plays a major role in how well students think, learn, and perform in school. Not enough rest affects memory, ability to focus, mood, and overall academic success.

Research shows doing well in school means more than studying hard. It is also about getting enough quality sleep and keeping a regular sleep routine. Sleep matters because it helps the brain store information. During sleep, the brain processes what was learned throughout the day and turns it into long-term memory. Lack of sleep hinders this process.

Studies have found that students who sleep poorly or for shorter periods often have lower GPAs. This means even if you study for hours, you may not remember the information later. So, staying up all night to review notes can actually make it harder to recall those notes during a test.

Sleep also affects attention and focus. Anyone who has tried to sit through a class while exhausted knows how difficult it can be to pay attention. Tired students may daydream, miss instructions, or struggle to complete assignments.

Research has found students who get better sleep generally participate more in class and stay engaged in their learning. Students who are constantly tired may seem uninterested or unmotivated, but in reality, their brains are simply not functioning at full capacity. Over time, this can lead to falling grades and frustration.

Consistent sleep is important too. Going to bed and waking up at different times every day can confuse the body. The body has an “internal clock,” which controls when we feel awake and when we feel sleepy. Staying up late on weekends and trying to wake up early for school during the week throws off the internal clock.

Researchers have found students with regular sleep schedules earn higher grades than those with irregular patterns.

Natural sleep patterns also influence school performance. Some people naturally feel more alert in the morning, while others feel more awake at night.

Research suggests students who naturally prefer mornings often perform better in school, especially because most schools start early in the day. Students who are naturally more alert at night may struggle to feel fully awake during early morning classes.

This does not mean students are lazy — it simply means their natural rhythm does not match the school schedule.

Without enough rest, people are more likely to feel stressed, anxious, or irritable. Poor sleep combined with emotional stress can lower motivation and make it harder to concentrate.

Research closely connects mental health and sleep. When students improve their sleep, they often improve their mood and ability to handle academic challenges.

Sleep should be considered part of preparing for school, not as time wasted.

Many students believe success comes from studying longer and harder, even if that means staying up late. Research clearly shows sleep supports memory, focus, engagement, emotional balance, and grades. You need sleep to do well in school.

Getting enough quality rest, keeping a consistent schedule, and understanding your natural sleep habits contribute to better learning.

When you prioritize rest, you give your brain the best chance to perform at its highest level.



# Something to Crow About

By Jose Burgos

Roosters have shaped Puerto Rican culture for centuries. I was born in Lancaster, but my family comes from Puerto Rico. I have traveled to the island many times. Each visit, I heard roosters crow from sunrise to sunset. I saw them in mountain towns and city neighborhoods. They moved freely through yards and along roadsides. Their presence stood out immediately.

Puerto Rican tradition long connected roosters to cockfighting, a practice the Spanish introduced in the Sixteenth Century. Families raised birds specifically for competition. They selected strong bloodlines, controlled feed, and trained the birds carefully.

As a child, I watched these routines without questioning them. They felt normal. Later, when I began studying animal welfare and veterinary science, I reconsidered what I had seen. I now measured those practices against

ethical standards and scientific knowledge.

Cockfighting followed strict rules and drew large crowds. People treated events as social gatherings. Owners invested time and money into conditioning their birds. They built proper enclosures and monitored diet and health. Even so, the fights caused clear physical harm.

Birds suffered fractures, puncture wounds, and severe stress. That reality forced me to look at the tradition more critically.

During recent visits, I noticed many families still kept roosters, even when they no longer entered them in competitions. The birds now represent heritage more than sport.

This shift reveals the tension between cultural identity and modern animal welfare. People want to preserve tradition, yet laws and ethical standards continue to evolve.

Roosters also have symbolic value beyond competition. In rural areas, families connect them to history and pride. Older relatives tell stories about past events and breeding lines. These conversations pass cultural memory from one generation to the next. The birds become part of family identity.

In 2018, federal law banned cockfighting in U.S. territories, including Puerto Rico. That decision changed the legal landscape and forced communities to adjust. Lawmakers wanted to protect animals from unnecessary harm.

The ban also sparked debate about cultural autonomy and outside regulation.

Animal welfare research documents the injuries associated with organized fights. Veterinary evidence shows trauma, infection, and long-term physiological damage.

Studying these findings strengthened my belief that professionals must apply science and ethics when evaluating tradition. Culture explains behavior, but it does not excuse preventable suffering.

When I traveled with my wife and son, I paid closer attention to how families interacted with their animals. I saw pride in husbandry and genuine attachment. I also saw the limits of tradition when it conflicts with modern welfare standards.

These experiences shaped how I think about my future in veterinary medicine. As a 41-year-old Puerto Rican man pursuing education later in life, I bring personal history into my studies. I understand the weight of culture. I also understand the responsibility to protect animal health. My goal is not to erase tradition but to guide it toward humane practices.

Respect for heritage and commitment to welfare can coexist when professionals lead with knowledge and integrity.

## **Scoliosis**

By Brock Taylor

Scoliosis affects the spine, which is the long line of bones that runs down the middle of your back. A healthy spine looks straight from behind. But from the side, it has gentle natural curves.

In a person with scoliosis, the spine curves sideways instead of staying straight. Sometimes it also twists or rotates. This can make one shoulder higher than the other, one hip stick out more, or the waist look uneven.

Doctors diagnose scoliosis when the sideways curve of the spine measures more than 10 degrees on an X-ray. About 2–3% of teenagers have scoliosis. It is most often noticed during puberty, when the body is growing quickly. Early detection is important because the curve can get worse during growth spurts.

The most common type of scoliosis is called idiopathic scoliosis. “Idiopathic” means the exact cause is unknown. This type makes up about 80% of all cases. It can run in families, which suggests a genetic link. Idiopathic scoliosis is usually found in children between 10 and 18.

Congenital scoliosis happens when the spine does not form normally before a baby is born. Some bones in the spine may be shaped incorrectly or fused, which can cause the spine to curve as the child grows.

Problems with the nerves or muscles that support the spine cause neuromuscular scoliosis. Conditions such as cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy can weaken the muscles, making it harder to keep the spine straight.

Degenerative scoliosis, which mostly affects older adults happens because of aging, arthritis, or wear and tear on the spine.

Doctors often first notice scoliosis during a routine checkup or school screening. A common test is the Adam’s Forward Bend Test for which the person bends forward at the waist, and the healthcare provider looks for unevenness in the back or ribs. If scoliosis is suspected, an X-ray is taken to measure the curve.

Treatment depends on the severity of the curve and how much growing the person has left to do. Mild cases may only need regular checkups. Moderate cases in growing teens may require wearing a brace to prevent the curve from getting worse. Severe cases might need surgery to straighten and stabilize the spine.

Untreated, scoliosis can sometimes cause back pain, breathing problems in severe cases, and low self-esteem due to changes in appearance. With early diagnosis and proper care, most people with scoliosis live healthy, active lives.

## **Veterinology Technology Fit Heart and Head**

By Alexa Kline

I was eight when I was finally tall enough to milk the cows. Before that, I watched them get milked, fed calves, and helped with smaller chores, but now I could finally participate.

Once I could reach the cows, my dad taught me how to dip them with iodine, and as I got older, he trusted me with more responsibility. Growing up on a dairy farm introduced me to working with animals and taught me patience, responsibility, and the daily commitment to care for them.

As a child, I loved drawing animals and figuring out how things worked. That curiosity led to a love for science. When I was 16, my dad retired from dairy farming due to chronic joint pain, we sold most of our

cows. But that didn't change the lessons I learned on the farm about hard work, problem-solving, and empathy for animals.

In high school, I explored science-based careers like zoology and wildlife biology. When I took an animal science class, I discovered my love for veterinary medicine. Before taking that class, I didn't know what a veterinary technician was.

My agriculture teacher encouraged me to join FFA and compete in the veterinary science competition, which helped me learn more about veterinary technicians.

In my senior year, I placed first in my county out of about 140 people. After that class and competition, I realized being a vet tech could be a great fit for me. I debated between becoming a vet or vet tech, but I chose veterinary technology because it would allow me to enter the field sooner and still keeping my future options open.

As I thought more seriously about my future, I realized this career also reflects the example my parents set for me. My dad is a farmer, and my mom is a nurse. Veterinary technology blends both worlds: hands-on animal care and medical knowledge.

Their dedication inspired me and showed me the kind of work I want to do.

Watching their commitment to their patients and animals taught me meaningful work often requires compassion and resilience.

Even though we no longer milk cows, we still have chickens, barn cats, two dogs, a cow, a calf, and two goats.

Recently, I lost two goats within days of each other. One morning, my fainting goat would not get up to eat. She nibbled what I offered her, but she died the next day.

Shortly after, I found my old Boer goat too weak to stand. I offered her food and water while keeping her as comfortable as possible, she became weaker and passed during the night. Watching her decline was difficult, and at times, I worried she was suffering.

Losing those two goats made me realize how deeply I want the knowledge and skills to do more to help animals in situations like that. I want the training to respond confidently to sick or weak animals and not just hope I am doing enough. Becoming a veterinary technician will allow me to serve animals with heart and skill.

Growing up on a farm taught me how to care for animals; becoming a veterinary technician will teach me how to save them.

# The Mechanics of Passion:

## Exploring Automotive Potential

By Joey Roman

For as long as I can remember, cars have been more than simple transportation—they have shaped who I am. While others may hear an engine as noise, I hear rhythm and precision.

Every rev, idle, and downshift feels like part of a mechanical symphony. My passion is not only about speed or appearance; it is about connection, creativity, efficiency, and the engineering systems that protect us. These elements together explain why the automobile remains one of the most influential inventions in history.

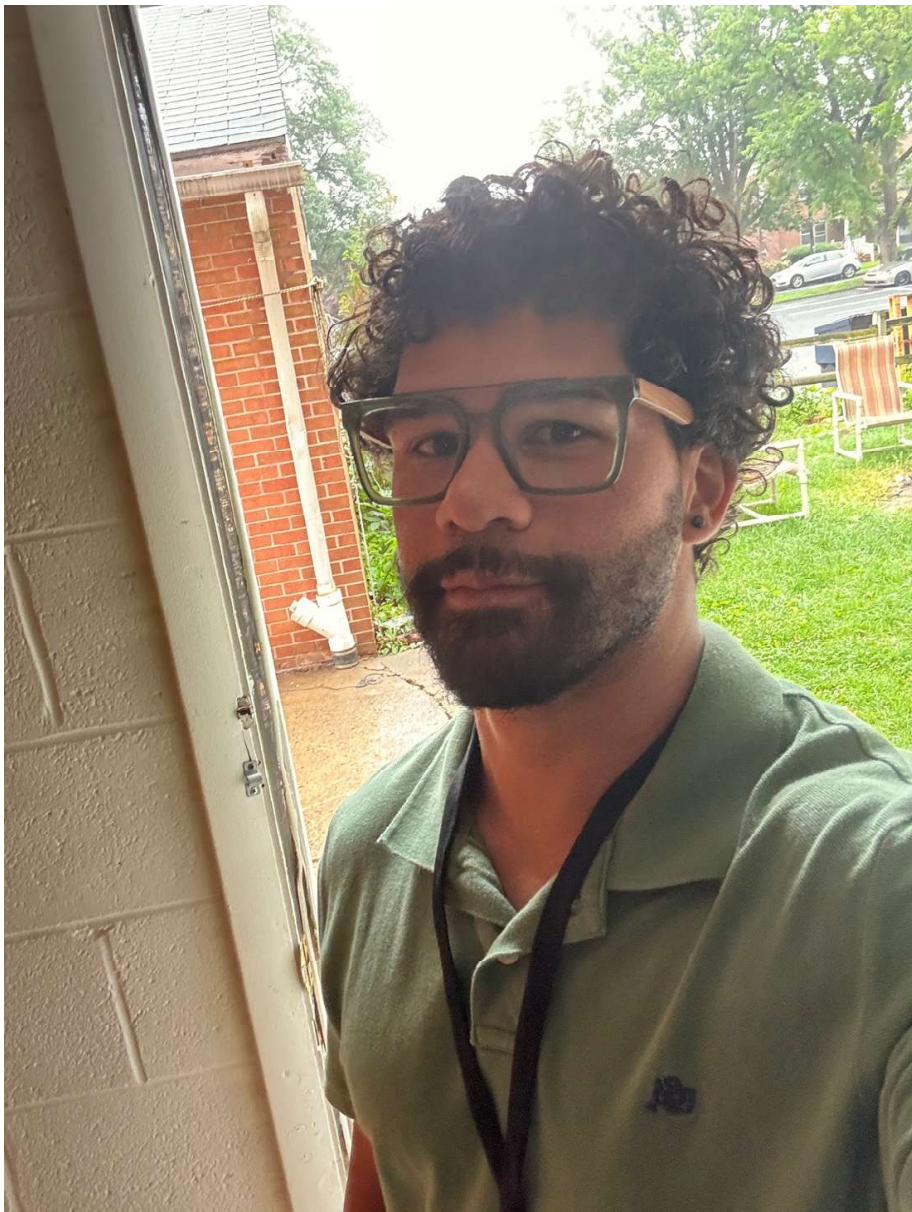
My love for vehicles began in the garage with my father. That space was more than a place to store tools—there I learned responsibility, patience, and problem-solving. Working on maintenance and upgrades created moments that strengthened our bond. Each repair required focus and teamwork, and every finished project brought a sense of pride.

What mattered most was not just fixing the car, but sharing the accomplishment. Seeing my father's satisfaction after completing a tough job showed me cars could represent legacy, trust, and shared effort. Through those experiences, automobiles became more than machines; they became symbols of connection.

Beyond family ties, cars fascinate me because of their endless potential for customization. A factory-built vehicle may be complete, but to me it is only the beginning. Cars are blank canvases that allow owners to express personality and creativity.

Aftermarket modifications combine performance with style, turning something ordinary into something unique. One of the most exciting upgrades is a turbocharger. Although forced induction relies on detailed engineering and airflow science, the result is straightforward—greater power and responsiveness. Even the visible piping and components highlight the beauty of mechanical design.

Customization also extends to appearance and handling. Wheels can completely change a car's stance, while aerodynamic additions like spoilers improve stability by generating downforce at higher speeds. Wider fenders create a bold presence, and interior upgrades, such as modern entertainment systems add comfort and individuality. Each change transforms a mass-produced vehicle into a personal statement.



Through my trade school experience, I have learned performance is not only about speed—it is about balance. Enhancing power while improving fuel economy requires thoughtful design.

Reducing weight, refining gear ratios, and optimizing fuel systems demonstrate how strength and efficiency can work together. Vehicles capable of running on Flex Fuel or gasoline further show how adaptable modern cars have become.

When I think of favorite vehicles, I appreciate

performance and design. The late-1960s Chevrolet Chevelle represents the bold spirit of American muscle. The Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution showcases precision, turbocharged performance, and all-wheel-drive capability.

At the highest level, the Audi R8 LMS GT2 reflects engineering without compromise, blending speed with striking design.

Despite my enthusiasm for upgrades and performance, I respect a car's essential systems most. The engine delivers power, the brakes ensure safety, and the steering provides control.

When these elements work in harmony, driving becomes meaningful. My passion for automobiles is more than a hobby—it is rooted in family, inspired by creativity, and guided by respect for engineering.

Beneath every hood lies possibility, and I am eager to keep discovering it.

# A Dog Fight

By Connor Deck

My best friend Nick and I were hanging out at his house one summer day. We had gone into his house to get out of the sun and look up torque specs on his computer. We had just finished getting all the specifications and instructions

and went into his kitchen to leave his pit bulls outside.

Nick has four pit bulls, and they are all immensely sweet and kind dogs now. But that day when we let them outside, the two unneutered male dogs had a scrap. Male dogs commonly fight over female dogs, and we watched in horror as Nick's dog Black violently attacked the jugular of the other dog Rommel.

The last thing I can remember was taking off my class ring; after that, Nick and I tried to keep the animals from killing each other.

It was one of the most awesome displays of raw power I have ever seen. And it was also the most terrifying and heartbreaking.

We had tried to break it up for five nonstop minutes, and Nick's arms were on fire. We were both extremely winded and barely had any strength left. I'll never forget the horrified dead-eyed stare they gave us. Unsure what to do next, we knew what would happen if we couldn't stop this. Or if either of us passed out.

That silent look we shared was one of uncertainty and determination, knowing if one of us went down, a dog might have to go also. It was one of the few times, I saw fear on Nick's face.

We finally managed to break the two animals apart long enough to suppress their violence and separate them.

We were covered in blood and fur; I had never hit an animal before that day. I had also never considered I might have to shoot the dog my best friend raised from a puppy.

If either of us had passed out, I know for a fact, there would only be three pit bulls today. It broke me to have to hurt an animal in ways I hurt those dogs to break the fight up, but I also know what I did was necessary; but sometimes necessary things are the most difficult.

I'm grateful his dogs are now spayed and neutered, and I never have to experience something that traumatic ever again. It's one thing to beat up another human since they can provide ample reason to be beaten. But punching a dog hurt more than punching my brother. Yet being told it was the right thing to do and knowing all four dogs are alive today because of what we did, makes it difficult to wrap my head around.

# To All the Almosts

By Selena Wagner

Lena Park had a strange tradition: whenever she stopped liking someone, she wrote them a letter.

Not to send. Just to move on.

She would write everything she never said. The butterflies, the awkward moments, the reason the crush finally faded. When she finished, she sealed the letter, wrote their name on the front, and placed it in a blue box under her bed.

One to Mason, the boy who shared his snacks with her in middle school.

One to Ryan, who sat in front of her in math and always helped her with homework.

One to Daniel, her neighbor who used to ride bikes with her every summer.

One to Tyler, the quiet boy in her art class who drew amazing sketches.

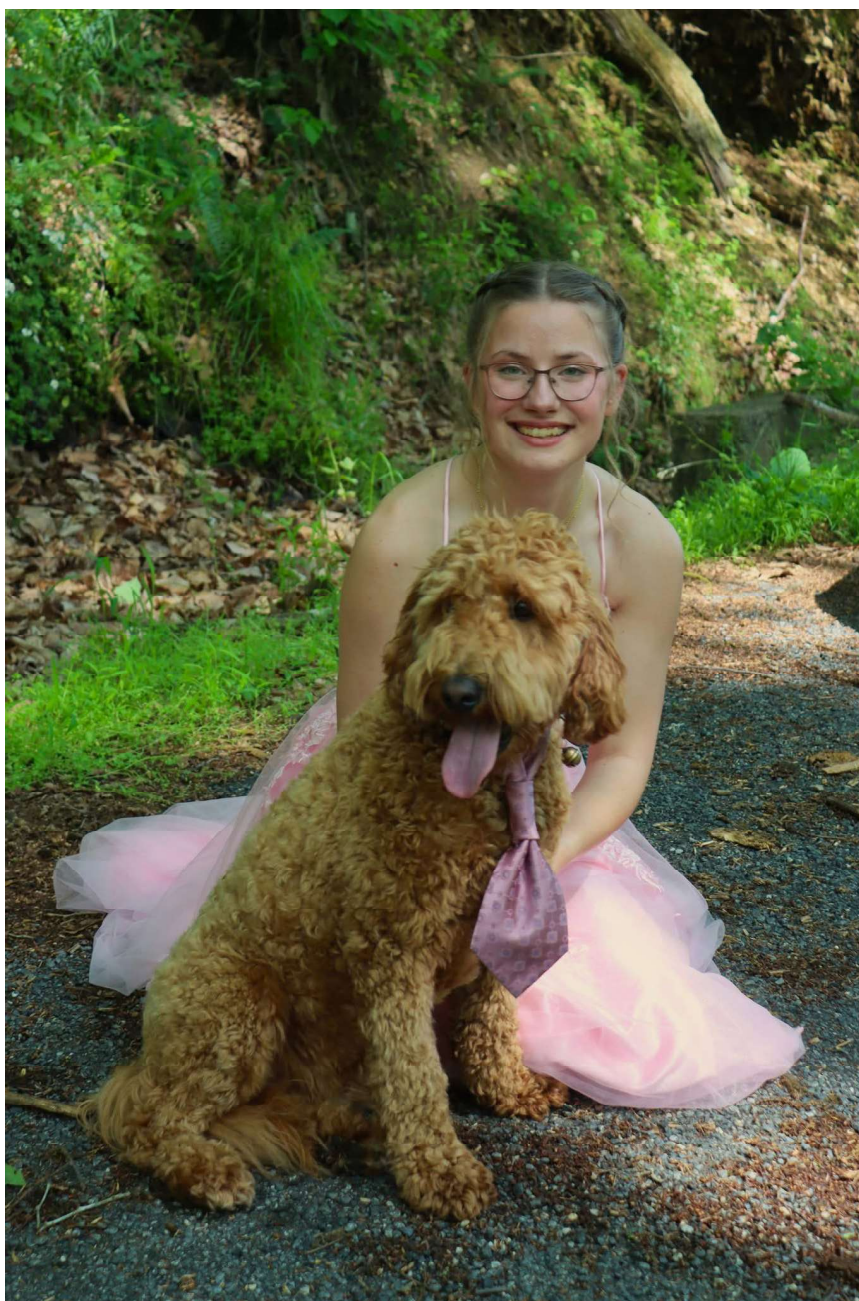
And the last one... to Noah Kim.

Noah was different. He wasn't just a crush. He had been her best friend for years before everything got complicated.

I never meant for anyone to read the letters.

They were just my way of getting over boys I'd almost loved.

Almost kissed.



Almost dated.

Almost mattered.

Six letters. Six almos. Each one sealed with a tiny gold sticker star, like they made them official.

And then, somehow, they got mailed.

I found out when Tyler leaned against my locker with a smirk that could only mean trouble.

"You write good endings," he said, holding up a pink pale envelope with my handwriting on it.

My stomach dropped to my shoes.

Letter number four.

The one where I admitted I liked the way he read poetry out loud in English class. The one where I said I wondered what it would be like if he ever looked at me the way he looked at stage lights during drama club rehearsals.

"I didn't mean to send that," I blurted.

"So you don't mean it?" he asked.

I opened my mouth.

Closed it.

Because the worst part wasn't that he'd read it.

The worst part was that I did mean it.

By lunch, three more boys cornered me.

Mason texted: So, I was your "what if?"

Ryan just sent a selfie with my letter and the caption: Guess I made the list.

I wanted to transfer schools or countries.

But Noah didn't laugh at me. He didn't tease me. Instead, he walked me to class as if nothing had changed.

"People like stories," he said quietly.

"So, let's give them one."

I blinked at him. "What does that mean?"

"It means," he said, lowering his voice, "We pretend we are dating."

I stared.

He continued, "It will make the others back off. They will think the letters are old news. Ancient history. Plus..." He hesitated. "It wouldn't be the worst thing in the world."

This was ridiculous.

This was dramatic.

This was possibly genius.

”Fine,” I said. “But there are rules.”

Rule number one: No hand-holding unless necessary.

Rule number two: No real feelings.

Rule number three: Absolutely no kissing.

The plan worked.

People stopped whispering. Benji stopped texting, Marco stopped smirking.

And Noah?

He started bringing me coffee in the mornings.

Started saving me a seat in class.

Started smiling at me like he had discovered something he did not expect to like.

One night, we were studying at his kitchen table when he found the final unopened letter in my backpack.

Number six.

The one I never mailed.

He turned it over in his hands. “Who’s this one for?”

I hesitated.

”It doesn’t have a name,” I admitted.

He raised an eyebrow.

”Because I hadn’t figured it out yet,” I said softly.

The room went quiet.

Slowly, carefully, he slid the envelope back toward me.

”You should finish it,” he said.

”For whom?”

He looked at me like it was obvious.

”For the boy who isn’t an almost.”

My heart did something dangerous.

Something very, very real.

I guess some letters aren’t meant to be mailed.

Some are meant to be delivered in person.



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