

FSPA WRITER OF THE YEAR PORTFOLIO

PREFACE

I grew up on South Beach — Collins Avenue, to be precise — from where it is a ten minute walk to the old Books & Books on Lincoln. There's a photograph my mother has, of me maniacally tipping my chin back on a bookshelf's ladder (which I was allowed to do only under the coy prying of the bookstore manager named Chip). Above the shelf read a graffiti'd Jorge Luis Borges quote: "*I cannot sleep unless I am surrounded by books.*"

There was never a striking moment in which I decided to become a writer, but it is in my visceral Books & Books memories that I first considered I could be one. I was the kid who read New Yorkers until the ink bled onto my fingers in second period Statistics. I wrote for my high school newsmagazine with a witty and dry sense of writer's humor, like the line, "Alex Watson touches dead bodies," of which I was fully serious. My friends coined me as someone who couldn't shut up out loud or on paper, who swore on the writings of Hollywood bohemian Eve Babitz like the Bible.

My father — at only three years older than my now-18 years of age — was rendered a refugee by the Yugoslav Wars, and my mother grew up destitute during this conflict. They are now engineers and doctors, respectively, interests drastically different than mine. And it is precisely my parents who have unwittingly harbored my future goals with the strongest influence: Of valuing what is intangible, what no war or conflict could take away... the intrinsically humane desire to hear and be heard.

I found out this past week that I have been accepted into New York University for Journalism, my dream school and dream program since freshman year. I look at what I have written below as motivation to enter a big-city school, where there are many stories in many tall condo buildings, where people lay their heads to sleep by books.

ALEX WATSON TELLS ALL

Dreyfoos's very own vocal senior answers the question, "What did you do over the summer?" with unexpected tenacity.

— *winner of the National Gold Medal in Journalism from the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards.*

Alex Watson touches dead bodies.

Between studying for the SAT and chilling with friends—which comprised much of her COVID-19 summer—Watson, who wears a navy Cornell Sweater and posts her film photos on VSCO, lives a seemingly secret life helping the Medical Examiner Office “conduct investigations of violent, sudden, unexpected, and suspicious deaths” in Palm Beach County, 40 hours a week.

For someone who likes to laugh, she isn’t joking.

Watson walks through the office, which is strung with blue and white streamers, adorned with ancient-looking textbooks, and home to Phil the Dummy (a medical mannequin currently not in use). It’s where “all the morgue technicians, the investigators, the doctors come inside of the conference room. We go through all the cases that we have for the day or that happened the night before.”

As Watson explains what she does with a healthy infusion of forensic pathology jargon, I try to hold back my surprise. “Homicides, suicides, and accident[s],” according to Explore Health Careers, are all means of death that medical examiners explore during their careers. (Usually, teen summer jobs consist of Publix gigs or Delivery Dudes. Not touching dead people.)

She laughs, and agrees with the unconventionality of her job.

“I never really thought about what [Forensic Pathologists] did,” Watson said. “I was like, ‘Oh, that’s really cool. But weird.’ I mean, it’s dead people.”

For Watson, this detail is vital—her work day starts with driving to the office, attending the team meeting, and writing up Covid reports for the deaths in Palm Beach County. It’s a job that, today, provides crucial statistics that will get kids back to schools, adults to work, and life to pre-COVID-19 conditions. She puts it bluntly: “This job is really important for the county.”

However, like any job relating to deaths and uncertainties, Watson’s day-to-day work is also filled with unexpected interjections.

“If there’s a scene, the investigators will come in and be like, ‘Do you want to go to a [crime] scene?’ In that case, it’s different every day,” Watson said, recounting a story from earlier that week. “It was an older man who had shot himself while he was driving. His car went into reverse and started doing donuts around the road. A witness came and tried to smash his window open so he could stop the car, and he fell. The car ran over his arm.”

“It was pretty intense,” she said, sighing. “It was the worst thing I’ve ever seen.” Although each scene is uniquely morbid and mentally difficult to process, Watson’s voice cracks as she explains her initial experiences with the job.

“I saw two suicides on my first day. There was a baby. The children really hit different—it’s really sad, especially when it involves the parent. But I always try to look at it

from more of a scientific and medical perspective, so to speak. When I look at a body, I feel the soul is separate.”

This mentality, alongside the support from Chief Medical Examiner Wendolyn Sneed and her team whom Watson describes as “as incredibly dedicated and passionate individuals,” helps her deal with the emotional toll that often comes with a job at the Medical Examiner Office.

Watson’s colleague and 2020 Suncoast High School graduate, Inayat Sood, described her as “very hard working [and] motivated.”

“She knows she wants to go into med school. And she’s only in high school,” Sood said.

With a gaze towards the future, this summer job she originally picked up from mere interest has turned into a serious passion—and a viable career choice—for Watson. “I didn’t realize that this is something I might want to do,” she said, in reference to herself before coming to the Medical Examiner Office.

Curiously enough, Watson’s current pursuits as a Dreyfoos vocal senior are rather unrelated to her aspiring interests. Inevitably, midway through the interview, I hesitate on asking a question that could procure an ingenuine response.

“Do you find any correlation between singing and your job?”

Watson cannot contain her laughter.

“No.” (More laughter.) “Honestly, no.”

Although singing itself doesn’t correlate to her skills used in the job, Watson does find herself at home because of her exposure—albeit unexpected—to music in the workplace.

“When you have to deal with such an emotionally taxing job like [Forensic Pathologists,] do you have to find ways to bring yourself up. They listen to music in the autopsy suites. When I went in [the Morgue], I was like, ‘You guys listen to music while you’re doing this?’” Watson remarks in retrospect.

And the surprise didn’t stop with the music as it did with what the medical examiners would do while listening to it (Which is to say, Watson received the chance to shadow a medical examiner during an autopsy. For many medical students, this is a once-in-a-lifetime type deal.)

“It’s really weird seeing someone that was walking 48 hours ago being cut open,” she says in awe. “It’s crazy seeing what’s inside of you. Even like, the skin. I’m like, ‘how is that? That’s me.’”

After the interview concludes, Watson gives me a tour of the conference room. She laughs at Phil the Dummy, pulling books off the shelves to show the camera before returning to work. Although “a summer job in the alternate universe of integral operations at Palm Beach County’s Medical Examiner Office” is a bit lengthy of a job description, it is a cool one. And if she doesn’t have time to say that, Watson can always say she touches dead bodies, and laugh.

REFLECTION

This piece was written nearly in one breath. I interviewed Alex a month before I wrote, mulling over how I could possibly approach this summer gig, whose premise was thoroughly intriguing.

In interviews, we mutually fathomed death by teenage complaints against formaldehyde's stench. Alex sang and listened to music in the autopsy rooms. I drew out her imagined souls, which she said left corpses ready for examination.

When I figured out the first line — that she really just touches dead bodies — the rest came tumbling out in a sticky tangle of medical examiner jargon.

NO, DON'T GO TO JEFFREY EPSTEIN'S HOUSE. AND NO, DON'T POST ABOUT IT.

— winner of the 'Best of SNO' scholastic journalism award, where 10% of hundreds of daily applicants are selected for re-publication on the Best of Sno website.

I cross his street on my morning bike rides. I've eaten at the same restaurants as he has. I'm friends with girls from the schools he's scouted at.

So it's not weird that my best friend chronicles a visit to this guy's house on Snapchat, or that my track teammates dance in front of the compound on TikTok. It's like, mutual friends.

And this definitely wouldn't be weird if the prime teen hangout spot in question was a beach house or a coastal cafe. But it definitely would be weird if it's the addy of infamous sex trafficking ring leader Jeffrey Epstein's Palm Beach Mansion. Right?

With the arrival of Netflix's docuseries "Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich," hordes of sixteen-year-olds have started fangirling over a serial abuser and his housing assets around the country. But in light of twerking on his front door gate, one thing is clear: America has a true crime fetish. And it's complicated.

Based upon real crimes committed by real people, the true crime genre likes to "dip a pen in gore," as described by the New York Times in 1987. It "make[s] sense of human brutality, and the public's feverish interest in real-life murder mysteries" — which is, in essence, the issue with consuming the genre.

Netflix's 2019 film, "Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile," explains the story of serial killer Ted Bundy through 2000's heartthrob actor Zac Efron. Centering on his love story and the ways in which he used his looks to lure in victims, MTV notes that "Much of the criticism centered on the ways ["Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile"] seemed to glorify or humanize Bundy."

Consequently, over 14 million tags of #tedbundy ran rampant on TikTok. Many of the users impersonate him in order to garner views and followers. And while, yes, the film does acknowledge that his murders were morally wrong, it has opened a gateway for teenagers to the

topic of true crime. Experts working with MTV news worried “these cautionary tales are sending mixed messages about infamy and culpability” to young audiences.

And with TikTok cementing itself as a haven and breeding ground for true crime-inspired content, users crushed on a Connecticut murderer, Peter Manfredonia, only several months ago amidst quarantine. On his Instagram, one user went as far as commenting, “you killed it in this pic, kill me next” on his account.

Never mind the obvious risks involved with contacting a murderer (who was, at the time, on the loose,) the bigger question still stands: If we had not been exposed to true crime as casual, Friday night entertainment, would we be fearless in the face of a killer?

The answer is no, because we would not have allowed ourselves to sympathize with cold-blooded criminals.

NPR points out that this sympathy often engenders curiosity within us, and that those with the “capacity for violence” counteract our lack of it. And yes, “lik[ing] creepy stories because something creepy [is] in us” is true. But this constant exposure to evil people that we insist are ‘not that evil’ cracks the soft spots of our hearts, and allows their actions to enter. Admittedly, I am a big fan of true crime content. It’s often portrayed in an interesting way — for many, it’s the comfort food of film. When done right (or really, done wrong), the people in the dangerous situations become characters whom we emulate emotions for. And how can we say no to true crime, when titles like “Cold Case Files, Don’t F**k With Cats” and “I am a Killer” are among Netflix’s most popular in the genre?

It’s not to say that there aren’t portrayals of true crime done in a morally sound fashion. The YouTube series “True Crime Daily” conducts investigations of true crime mysteries and cases through a journalistic lens. The focus is not to entertain audiences, but to inform them, and that is where a solution to stop murder media consumption lies. The film “Lost Girls” takes into account the real-life story of murdered sex workers in Long Island. Instead of focusing on the killer, the movie centers around mother Mari Gilbert who constructs a community based around the victims’ families. The reason “Lost Girls” is such a success is the “portray[al of] sex workers as three-dimensional people,” according to Time, instead of the criminals as such rounded individuals themselves.

Yet, we must recognize that most often the obsession is not harmless for the victims of the crimes. Save for fleeting moments of representation, most aren’t given a lasting platform. If they are, it often comes in the package of a minute interview window. “Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich” does center around these victims’ stories, but it also centers around the fashions in which Epstein manipulated them, abused them, and indulged in his crimes. In true crime media, the criminal is the star. For me, it is the main reason I am so disturbed my friend’s actions: How can we cede our platforms to criminals? How can we engage with their lives, if on screen or in real life? And most importantly: How can we excuse what they did?

So no, I'm not going to Jeffrey Epstein's house. I will not post about him, nor will I finish the docuseries. Without the luck of timing, my friends and I could have very easily found ourselves in that house — and we wouldn't exactly be taking selfies.

REFLECTION

I was compelled to write this story because, two miles away from my house, Jeffrey Epstein resided in his Palm Beach mansion. In the opposite direction — also two-odd miles from my house — he recruited high school girls for grooming and sexual exploits.

His scandals were the talk of the town. Even today, in the wake of his partner Ghislaine Maxwell's trial, I frequently find myself in conversations about these horrific occurrences.

This story is loaded with quotes and data, since I had recently learned to incorporate statistics in my stories. I reflect on this piece as having not trusted myself to write it. But the prose came out honestly. I used words to settle my deepest fears, and remind myself that now, with his mansion torn down, some of the terror may wash away with it.

THE CORNFIELDS, THE CLASSROOM, THE CHRONICLES

In conversation with world history teacher Wendy Zietz.

— winner of the 'Best of SNO' scholastic journalism award, where 10% of hundreds of daily applicants are selected for re-publication on the Best of Sno website.

Imagine this...

You're a senior at Illinois State's U-High in Bloomington, Illinois. You're two and a half hours from Chicago and fringe bangs are in and the university coffee store has great printers. You only know this because tonight, your friend Hudson from the public high school prints the whole grade a map that you'll read from the dashboard to direct Leslie— who's driving — to Hudson's farm. From there, you head to the cornfields set up with kegs and Nirvana blasting from the radio. Buffy — in the backseat — notices a car behind you. Probably lost like us, you think. And then, just as Buffy puts Leslie's car keys into her purse and you jump into the sea of lights and kids and music, the car behind you turns on its sirens and your entire grade is running through stalks of corn, hoping to get lost from the cops. Well, your entire grade minus you and Leslie, who forgot that Buffy (now running) took the getaway car's keys.

Mrs. Zietz busted Hudson's entire cornfield party of Bloomington, Illinois and she still hasn't forgotten.

And, well, neither have we. The Cornfield Story is told so often we call Buffy-isms in class — a sort of rite of passage for sophomores in World History. And though most teachers

have a staple story of which to warn students against, this anthology of memories running through the farmlands of small-town America is different.

Mrs. Zietz teaches only in stories. Her cornfield chase comes right after Cleopatra's scandals.

"I judge myself — the biggest thrill I have is kids that are freshmen that didn't take AP, or took AP as freshmen and they weren't successful in it, [that] find success in here. That's how I judge my worth as a teacher."

"And I guess I kind of have that view for the world. Why can't we bring up 'the bottom'?" she asks, referring to the entirety of world history.

Unlike average AP classes in which college-level material is taught in a high school manner, Mrs. Zietz teaches it like we are already in college. She walks around, tells stories, drinks her coffee (two to three cups in a morning class), and expects us to write it down. Or not.

It's a class in which studying is put into students' hands but the teacher's pass rates are the highest in the nation. Her 2019-2020 fourth-period class had a 100 percent pass rate, rare even among academically competitive schools.

"People that come in here gifted with 160 IQs or whatever, and every resource in the world — their college counselors — they don't need me," Mrs. Zietz said. "They get fives on the exams, go to four-year universities, those kids are fine. But the kids that don't have confidence, have never taken an AP class, can see that this isn't for other people. This is for you, too."

This past summer, as the Black Lives Matter movement ignited around the US, Mrs. Zietz took to her Instagram — where she posts about Tom Zietz, her golden retriever puppy, and relatable school memes — to voice her support for the protestors.

She registered as a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She asked for book recommendations from black authors. She argued with family members on Facebook, defending black citizens.

On the first day of my sophomore year, Mrs. Zietz announced a test. And then she announced that she does not teach the white man's history.

"Looking back, I grew up in a crazy conservative area," Mrs. Zietz said. "But I didn't know when I was young that it was conservative. The model of my hometown was kids should be seen and not heard. And so we had a lot of freedom. I just accepted people for people."

"Then I started teaching. My very first students were ESOL [English to Speakers of Other Languages] students, so my room was 100 percent diverse in multiple ways. And sometimes, I would be the only white person in the room." (Mrs. Zietz had only one black classmate and two Jewish classmates in her hometown, she recounts.) "I remember how other teachers and administrators were talking about my students and I would get so outraged. Nobody had any expectations for them to do well."

"And then I read that silence is interpreted by people of power as approval. And I really changed my view and how I behave. This summer, after George Floyd, [I realized] to be silent is approval. We need to protect everybody. We need to make room."

Within Mrs. Zietz's classroom, this is how it is done. We used to call her, affectionately, a second mom.

"She thought of her students as her literal kids," dance junior Addie Joslin said. "She treated us so good. The one time I needed help on a test, I went to her for tutoring one morning and on the next test and I got the best grade I had gotten all year. She literally wrote me a handwritten letter saying she was proud of me.

"I still have it."

In response to whether the 'second mom' title is scary, Mrs. Zeitz said, "No pressure ... Like, joy. Because [I] didn't have kids, [My husband and I] chose not to, so it's fun to have influence."

"I like it. We remember our relationships."

When I ask Mrs. Zietz whether she can tell me a story no one knows about her, she thinks for five minutes. It's clear she keeps no secrets in her classroom.

"I used to skip school, a lot," she confesses.

"I don't think I've ever had a sub in your class," I say.

"Oh, I'm totally different now. I don't like it. If I miss school, it's thought out plenty ahead of time."

I look around Mrs. Zietz's classroom while she ventures into a story about how she almost ended up living in Hawaii after a family vacation. Before COVID-19, her desks were pushed next to each other so she could walk around and socialize about the Umayyad Caliphate. From the upper right corner of her room — my old seat — you could see her Jolly Monk shrine and bookshelves all at once. Now, it's much more bare. Except that in this classroom, the stories are the only decorations needed.

"Maybe I'd be in a surf shop today in Hawaii, wearing the puka necklace," she jokes. "That's not bad. Everybody's happy in Hawaii."

And for the record, Buffy returned the car keys.

Mrs. Zietz never went to a cornfield party again.

REFLECTION

I had a blast interviewing Mrs. Zietz for this piece, as I often look for reasons to visit her classroom and strike up conversations. I ran with the Buffy-isms in this story, which were to us sophomores ingrained in the fabric of human history.

I find that this lead is choppy and my turns of phrase are not smooth. I can barely find a simple sentence till halfway through — a harrowing writer's trait to overcomplicate anything on a page. Though I do find that I included a human-interest element within this story, a facet I think I am strong in capturing.

(This classroom was the last, non-Covid-19 experience I had before lockdown. There is a photograph someone took of our corner in class with a film camera, which barely developed. All you can see in this photograph is my notebook, full from start to bottom on notes of the Umayyad Caliphate.)

THE WORLD MAP WALKS INTO A GROCERY STORE: MY ADVENTURES AT

FOODTOWN

The ethnic grocer — and safe haven — that immerses shoppers in world travel that Covid-19 has limited.

— published on the Gen-ZINE website, which is committed to addressing contemporary issues through the Generation Z viewpoint. Founded at the University of Southern California.

The aisles mix stale yellow lighting with electric blue Ramune marble soda. A lady dressed in traditional yellow/orange/green African garb reaches for clear aniseed essence. Pork uterus sits across the counter from fleshy pink groupers whose mouths are agape in shock. Jars of green soursop stack aesthetically next to the oily sofrito. A van full of monks enter in orange cassocks. Crinkly maracuja wafts a sweet-and-sour smell through my mask. I cannot tell whether I've landed in Sao Paulo or Osaka or Kingston or Ankara, but I am certainly not in West Palm Beach any longer.

I am, in fact, in Foodtown (an empire-megalopolis-realm-hybrid whose shelves are stocked with foods most of us would have never eaten if only on trips that involved overnight flights.)

It's a little overwhelming.

Now that grocery stores have morphed into high-fashion destinations amidst quarantine, visiting Foodtown is like a trek to the ends of the Earth; it is safe to ensure that whatever you see in this melting pot of nations equates to a promising vacation.

Upon the absence of international travel, ethnic grocers like Foodtown offer what big-shot airlines, travel planners, and the tourist industry during COVID-19 cannot—a chance to safely experience a myriad of cultures through food.

My shopping cart dangerously careens on wheels pared down into wonky shapes, occasionally bumping into tubs of mango and lychees. The produce section stirs with bustle and Spanish pop songs as people pick through fluorescently colored fruits and vegetables. I weave through sugar canes akin to palm trees in height. Workers with golden skin and rolling r's stack pears on top of each other, laughing at the balancing act. The display of ten different kinds of okra seems to eliminate competition for any other vegetable, as ladies in brown bonnets with

black bows bag them quickly. I feel transported into a store from the first weeks of quarantine—*how can a place so busy exist today?*

The seafood and meat market smell strongly of ocean and farm land. I peek into tubs of live frogs or live yellow eels or live blue crabs that buzz with eerie movement. Butchers—who wave to me with white gloves and enthusiastic smiles—catch swimming tilapia with fish nets in front of a lengthy line. The sheer variety of seafood is astonishing—unlike the average Walmart or Target, Foodtown houses almost any version of almost any product (the *town* part is literal.)

As a quarantine-sick student—as so many of us are—peering into different buckets of seafood and produce starkly reminds me that this is not another trip to Target or Publix, but a near-guarantee that you will see something unpredictable, and enticing. Admittedly, yes, it is “just another store,” and a potential risk to contracting the virus. But if you are accepting the risk of buying groceries within stores, Foodtown comes close to a style of entertainment and cultural immersion that I have lately felt bereft of as a former-frequent-traveler.

And although many of its products are excitingly pretty in pink (dragonfruit) or smell of dried roses (tea), it’s the hanging cow buttocks and fresh pigs’ ears that capture the essence of the store: What seems strange to you is not strange to others. Get used to it.

In the Hispanic foods aisle, a worker stacking beans upon beans upon beans explained that he is from Ojocaliente, Mexico, where most everyone is a farmer. Amidst Flan mix and pacaya in jars, he says he doesn’t think about much except for the farming.

“We have many hot springs, too, in Ojocaliente” he says in this little aisle, grows quiet, and softly laughs.

This is what Foodtown does to you.

(I’d like to think it also offers a home for those who don’t find one in the white-washed streets of suburban Florida. For me, I feel that such a store is so rare to find that we should indulge in celebrating it.)

Eventually, when I end up back in the car and retrace my steps home, I am exhausted. On the intersection of Military and 45th, in the old Winn Dixie with a violently yellow coat of paint and wicked shopping carts, I soared through Foodtown, somewhere between 10,000 feet in altitude and West Palm Beach.

REFLECTION

I once saw, at 9:15 PM in the Foodtown parking lot, a van of monks in orange robes enter the store, just as I was leaving.

I tell you this because I most vehemently wish that I sat around Foodtown the whole day — not just three hours — and interviewed more people. There are so many stories here that their raw transcripts could span pages.

And the imagery, oh the imagery that I could delve into further, is never-ending. Even the butcher section is beautiful here. There are legs of pig drying out, swinging from the ceiling, as my family does so in Serbia and Bosnia. I am afraid my words fall short of describing Foodtown's rough-around-the-edges charm.

Some family friends have used this as a tour guide and entered the grocery store themselves. I go with my friends, on a sort of adventure, to see what is new in their expansive aisles. I have never gone and left empty handed. Nor have I ever visited without seeing some noteworthy occurrence. If you are in south Florida, I urge you to visit, to see for yourself.

WHAT WE LEARNED FROM THOSE WHO FEEL INVISIBLE

An awakening journey with the janitors through the halls of high school.

**Co-Written with Sam Cohen*

— First Place Winner for Story of the Year from the National Scholastic Press Association in the Opinion Writing Category, selected from stories submitted by high school publications around the nation.

She wakes at 4:30. We're already late. Amid the ineffable silence of early dawn, she ties two pink bows into her hair and prepares her family's lunches. We pull into the dimly lit student parking lot at 5:55 a.m. Shuffling fifteen-odd jangling keys, she opens the gates. She leads us into the supply room — we've never been here before. With a flashlight, we begin the journey.

The process is slow. We trudge through each hallway of each building, wincing as she turns on the lights. The darkness is overwhelming. "I bring my husband sometimes," she says, "if I'm alone, if it's too dark." Once the lights are on, she takes us to the basement. The mop heads are thrown from the washing machine to the dryer. The sun starts to rise now — she drags two blue recycling bins, each bigger than herself, out by the dumpsters. She scrubs with a faded yellow broom until the hose water runs black from the bins.

We yawn. We're exhausted before the first bell, we tell her.

Yuritza giggles, calls us cute. "The day hasn't started yet."

Who are the janitors? In theory, it's a simple question. They clean our school. They pick up our trash, collect our trash bins, and then take out our trash. They scrub the staircases we stomp on. They paint over our graffiti on the cafeteria walls. Every time we throw the laminated "It's Covid! Wash your hands" sign into the toilet and flush it, they clean up the flood of sewage water with their industrial mops.

And we aren't oblivious. Our mess doesn't magically disappear. But beyond the detergent soaps and navy blue uniform, could you actually name any of the 13 people that put our health before theirs in the middle of a pandemic?

We didn't even know there were 13. We thought there were only two.

Anyways, it serves us right that the custodians ignored us for two weeks before we could sit them down for an interview.

When we saw the Head Custodian, Oscar Gonzales, drive his golf cart across the soccer field, we ran to catch up (literally chasing him.) We were told repeatedly that the language barrier between us and the janitors was too thick and that we would not be able to easily communicate with them. But that wasn't the problem. The problem was that they all said no.

At least, until we met custodian Yuritza Hernandez in the middle of a band hallway and asked her if she liked her job.

"The students and staff are nice to me," she says. She takes her blue latex gloves off and sits on the ground next to us. "I like my job. A lot."

We share a side-eyed glance. She enjoys her job? We didn't expect that answer. Especially when she explains the cafeteria situation.

"So maybe two weeks ago, one kid painted my wall. I come in during lunch time and I say, 'Oh my god.' Two or three days [it was painted,] the first time it's [in] black. Two or three days next — same because it's the boys' bathroom — painted white on the wall. I said, 'Oh my god, no, please.'"

Even though she went to school administration for help, the boy was not caught. She tells us this happens all the time. The next morning, she shows us her painting skills on the cafeteria bathroom walls.

"See, I painted here and here," pointing to tinted splotches of paint. For such a laborious task, Yuritza smiles. There is an odd sense of accomplishment in the boys bathroom at 6:10 a.m. Following each eight-hour shift, Yuritza goes home to handle her second job of being a mother. She cooks every meal for her family of four, and continues to clean while at home. Pulling out her phone, she proudly shows off her daughter.

"So my daughter, before, she'd say, 'I know mom, but I don't understand how custodians work until you work as a custodian.' Because I explain what we do every day."

She sighs.

"So now she tells me, 'Mom, I have a concern because you are coming and my leg pain, my hip pain, my back pain,' so if the students know how hard we work, maybe they help more." Throughout our conversations with Yuritza, she would bend over to pick up leftover garbage from the day before. Gathering the remnants of a shredded sandwich, she giggles, blaming a raccoon.

We share another side-eyed glance.

It was not a raccoon.

But we join her and pick up the remaining lunchbox contents. There's an immediate sense of guilt for our classmates' actions that are now so unavoidably present. How could we not want to help?

While she talks, Yuritza consistently hesitates.

“I don’t know if you understand me because I don’t speak much English but ...”

We understand perfectly.

Once our AP U.S History teacher Katie Sheridan heard about our story, she excitedly introduced us to her “good friend” Gilbert Colon, the Building 3 custodian.

When we meet him, he’s wearing a New York Yankees mask and a navy blue shirt. We make sure we’re not interrupting his work. He shakes his head, eager to be interviewed.

“I wait for all of you to go back to class, and then start all over again. Every time your bell rings, I go into the bathroom, wipe all the doorknobs. Then I go and do it again in two hours, and then in another two hours.”

He wipes his forehead of sweat.

Gilbert tells us he enjoys the cleanliness of his job, and how it affects him beyond the school gates.

“My wife says I got OCD so everything I do has to be perfect. My wife’s half of the closet is all messed up, but mine is color coordinated.”

Laughing it off, he finds fault from the underappreciation of our friends.

“Ehh, not really appreciated,” he pauses. “Not really. They just go by — by the end of the day, you see things that shouldn’t be done. Like writing on the tables, sticking gum under the tables, just throwing things on the floor instead of taking it to the nearest garbage can.”

It’s a starkly different answer from when we talked to Yuritza.

“I know they wouldn’t do it at their home, so why would they do it here?”

Unlike the students, Gilbert has a different connection to the teachers in Building 3 — like Ms. Sheridan.

“They love me and I love them,” he says.

When Ms. Sheridan lets us skip class for this interview, we don’t doubt it.

The big yellow mop buckets now became our leading clue for scouting the janitors. Carefully listening to the faint jangle of keys, we find Tucker scrubbing the staircase railing on the fourth floor of Building 1.

Ralston Tucker, whom most everyone calls Tucker (well, those who know his name), tells us his backstory. Originally from Kingston, Jamaica, Tucker moved to Florida in 1978. We immediately share a bond over breadfruit and soccer. Within minutes, the interview transitions into more of a conversation.

“I’m glad you guys came to talk to me. Some kids, they walk by and pretend not to see me.”

Tucker is lonely.

“I don’t know if it’s my color,” he says, “but it’s like I’m invisible.”

We tell him the goal of this story is to end that feeling of being unseen and unheard. However, it's here we also learn that this story won't change the system that allocates tens of millions of dollars to coronavirus relief and extra cleaning supplies, but only raises the custodians' annual salary from \$24,900 to \$25,200, a mere 1.01 percent raise. Our intentions aren't to give them an increase of pay — although that would be nice, Superintendent Donald E. Fennoy.

Truly, our intentions are to end this layer of invisibility that stretches from the mop to our student body.

“One girl asked me if I needed help,” Tucker laughs. “I told her, ‘No sweetheart ... But thank you.’”

He tells us he thought about her for the rest of the week.

Tucker also tells us about the anonymous girl who threw his COVID-19 sign he hung up in the restroom, into the toilet. Numerous times. For numerous weeks.

Throughout each frustrating story, we get more and more uncomfortable. His eyes, glossy from previous eye surgeries, hide the feelings of 20 years of neglect, but also hold unwavering dedication.

“I still love everyone and will continue to do my job with love,” he says, “even if they don't love me back.”

He interrupts our next question. “Guess my age.”

Huh?

“Guess my age. Go on.”

We smile and stutter. No one has asked us this question before, especially in an interview. We go with 45.

He's 71.

He tells us he only eats fish — he jokes it's a secret to looking young. Tucker continues to share memories from on the road, touring with his reggae band around the country.

We're in shock. Actively touring in a band is definitely not what we expected. He amazed us. It leaves us wondering how many stories like this exist and are left unheard.

When we turn to leave, he asks us to breach the COVID-19 restrictions and give him a hug. “I really appreciate this. I'm here always, whenever.”

On the fourth floor of Building 1, he returns to scrubbing the staircase railings. This time, with a smile.

Custodian Jim Frampton really likes to recycle. He titles himself an avid recycler.

“It's vital that the whole world recycles,” he says. Jim further explains to us his dedication, putting a recycling bin for plastic and paper in each room of Building 4, which covers both the dance and science departments.

We ask him to contextualize the passion.

“Oh man, are you kidding me?” He sits up. “Global warming, the fact that landfills are overflowing ... it’s really the way to go to keep the planet alive.”

Like Gilbert, Jim also has a unique bond with the teachers of Building 4. He tells us he often trades eco-conscious documentaries with AP Environmental Science teacher Elyce Ashbee Hill.

As passionate as he is in regards to saving our planet and campus, he doesn’t see the link between his work dedication and his income.

“If I made enough money, I wouldn’t have to worry about my mortgage. We barely make over minimum wage. If I could enjoy my life more, maybe I could enjoy my job more.”

Despite this, Jim digs through the garbage every day, separating recyclable items from the trash. The extra work doesn’t bother him.

His heartfelt devotion overcomes the meager pay.

The sun has now fully risen and the water from the blue bins that Yuritza scrubs begins to run clear. She tells us that we’re the first people to be interested in her job. We tell her that will change.

“I hope,” she responds.

We pile into her golf cart and ride up to the front of the school. She stops in front of flowers. She points at the budding orchids.

“I planted these. I have 30 more at home.”

In some of the pots, the soil is freshly turned. We tell Yuritza they’re beautiful. Not just the flowers themselves, but the action of nurturing life in filth. Behind them, she picks up pieces of trash. We turn to help.

“They’re my favorite flowers,” she says, bending down to smell a growing bud. She tells us how she thinks they make the campus pretty. It’s a serene moment to have before our classmates flood the student parking lot.

Yuritza’s legacy of these obscure orchids is peculiar and unnoticed. And if there’s one thing we learned from the invisible, it’s that the orchids will bloom, even if we’re the only ones to see.

REFLECTION

This story is undoubtedly the most important piece I have written during my time in high school. We owe the janitors a lot more than just this story, but it is the start to acknowledging and appreciating their corner of our school campus.

My co-writer Sam and I wrote this story completely half and half. It is often a point of question as to why I would include this piece in my portfolio, because it is not entirely made up of my words. But during Thanksgiving break — three all-nighters in, nodding off with coffee mugs still in our hands — some ineffable camaraderie, found only in journalism, occurred.

I fully maintain that this story is as much each other's as a story co-written could ever possibly be.

Our article gained a lot of traction online the first week it went up — over one thousand hits, even kids from other schools contacting us, thanking us for writing this. Many Instagram shares.

Then, the buzz around this story died down.

Until it won First Place Story of the Year from the National Scholastic Press Association, the highest honor in scholastic media. We were even interviewed by WPBF 25 News for this top honor, the first kids in Palm Beach County to have received it.

Though I do believe that the biggest reward which resulted from this writing is that the janitors have this story hung up on their break-room wall. It is a testament to the start of our reporting the truly unsung voices around us.

ZACH WILILIAMS HAS A COLD

In 1965, writer [Gay Talese](#) couldn't [chase down](#) Frank Sinatra. In 2021, with the future Sinatra who goes by piano senior Zach Williams, neither can I.

7 p.m. at Meyer Hall and Zach Williams is playing the piano. He's got a white button down with blue striped plaid and gray slacks. He waves to his left and mutters some casual phrase, like, *this is my original composition called, uh, walking through the grove, or something*, like a scene straight out of a high school jazz recital where my father would be asleep (which, he is). Then Zach Williams sits down, no note sheet, half on the bench half not, light brown dress shoes stomping on pedals every so often, he sits down and hits the keys so hard my father wakes up. He's acing his own song: He's hitting scales indecipherable yet flowing, while he laughs at a trumpet player grooving and still flowing, unlike a piano recital but, erm, Preservation Jazz Hall in New Orleans where people would line up and get dizzy in the night just to listen to the endless ramble of someone who knows they're on fire, and Zach's still playing, laughing, certain he is overtime on whatever measure his solo's been allotted but whatever, cause this is some river flowing and not a jazz recital, where the music kids in the back are screaming so you can only hear the furrow of his brow as he's smashing the keys. At this point I lean over and say, "Hey, this kid's in my gov. class," to my father, who is now very much awake. Then Zach Williams cocks his head and his lip curls to the right, stopping in the middle of his solo. Hits a high key to smirk. *Ding*. Yeah. Zach's got it.

Naturally, a writer's dream subject is someone like Zach. He is smiley and precocious for being eighteen, and for being at a jazz recital at the same time. But it's him, who knows when to solo and when to overdo it and then when to stop and let the trombone play some sullen riff to

follow up — the poor trombone who knows they've got nothing on this, when Zach is practically on fire.

Except I'm not going to interview him because I can't. Zach Williams will go famous and I'll miss this big break, because when I was supposed to interview the next Frank Sinatra in our last year of high school, Zach Williams got a cold and played hooky on our shared Government and Politics class.

I might've thought the kids in the stands were on fire, too, if Zach wasn't playing. In the hallways, or during intermission, it is these kids in the stands — most of them completing concert reflections for assignments — who give me a full picture of Zach, who, on stage, is seemingly easy to figure out.

“What makes Zach so cool is that he learned how to play jazz piano over winter break freshman year, and then he's just excelled,” band senior Ellen Dahlstrom says, during the intermission of the December 7th Meyer Hall Jazz Night. We're leaning over a row of seats to hear each other over the rumble of conversation from parents in dress pants and the kids in sweats. She herself has studied with Zach as a classmate and musician since middle school, now nearly seven years ago.

“Now he's one of the best jazz pianists for high schools,” Dahlstrom says, swinging her arm around the entirety of Meyer Hall to signify the faraway lands of Little Rock or Topeka or anywhere beyond a school amphitheater, that not even there is a better jazz pianist our age than Zach.

(When asked for awards I could list to bolster his repertoire, Zach tells me that he has bored of competitions, in large part due to the formulaic nature in winning them. These conversations are, for us, fast and most always in passing.)

Then some kids walk on stage, and intermission's over, this time a piece without a Zach piano solo. I jump the rows and rib my dad, who is falling asleep again.

I recall that towards the end of freshman year, at a quinceanera, I had for the first time worn a pair of high heels.

I was laughing because whoever was in front of me at the country club, well, he was wearing a rather ironed suit-and-tie, and shined pair of dress shoes. We were only fifteen.

This kid must have been Zach. Because as I was clamoring up the lined bricks to get through, it was Zach Williams who bowed his head, swung open the door, and said, “Allow me,” in a rumbling voice, eliciting an eye-roll but also laughter.

Weeks before the jazz recital in Meyer Hall was Prism at the Kravis Center for the Performing Arts, with celebrity appearances from best-selling writer James Patterson and the Palm Beach County School District Superintendent Mike Burke. It wasn't just some recital.

And on stage, Zach Williams strutted on with a white suit jacket and black dress pants and an off-white cream colored turtleneck. He looked like he was performing in Vegas. For Sinatra's Rat Pack.

It was here, in the early stages of setting up interview dates which either of us would foil at the last minute, that I realized Zach comes across as a dapper gentleman, what with his grand gestures and flourishes of his hand, waving to the audience with raised eyebrows. It was not unlike how he behaved with me at the quinceanera where I could not quite figure out how to walk.

In our Government and Politics class are a series of piano majors. And I've heard the lot of them murmur: Zach's technical skill on piano wasn't too technical, that it was sloppy, that it flowed like the Loxahatchee River twenty miles up the road. For me, it was hard to decipher, the line between jealousy and criticism. The kid's performing for one of the world's top-selling authors and he's got *solos* and he's probably going over time, never mind the trombone.

Though in any case, it's Band Director Evan Rogovin, quick to share a quip about the piano man, who sets the record straight.

"Zach has a natural charisma about him that is very personable — you just smile when he talks," Mr. Rogovin said, smiling, while prepping some jazz musicians for the next set.

And it was true — our government teacher, Michael Esopakis, had on several occasions requested Zach read the Ninth or the Fourteenth Amendments out loud. He has a booming voice.

"And when he plays" Mr. Rogovin concluded, "that same personality comes out of his fingers."

Zach and I mean to get an interview going, we really do. But there are life circumstances — broken phones, government tests, more quinceaneras — which make chasing down Zach a difficult and arduous task.

So I text a good friend, band senior Joshua Kopit, during the jazz recital. The conversation goes like this:

"josh, why is zach williams so cool?"

"just listen to him."

And then I talk to Ellen Dahlstrom again in the music-kids-screaming-in-the-stands section who is interrupted by piano junior Makens Joseph muttering, "Okay, alright, okay," grabbing my phone so that the recording has got him.

"I wouldn't play jazz if it wasn't for Zach," Joseph says whilst staring straight into my phone and watching the audio rise up and down with his voice. "He's just great. He doesn't even want to do music later, which is crazy."

So then there are all these kids screaming in the stands, they all say the same thing, like, *It's crazy bro, he doesn't even want to play after high school!* I confirm through various sources — including himself, recovering from the cold — that the gig for Zach isn't necessarily his primary chosen career path.

What Zach Williams really wants to do is become a finance dude and work in corporate.

Watching him play, I wouldn't be surprised if he merges career paths — Sinatra won an Oscar once, too. And Mr. Esopakis, our government teacher, he keeps proving that there's always radio broadcasting for someone with that booming of a voice. Though at any rate, Zach Williams already has the finance dude part down, down to the gray slacks and white button down. Except, if there's a no-cold policy. Then Zach Williams doesn't "got it".

That would certainly be unfortunate.

REFLECTION

This story, as seen in the subheadline, is totally influenced by Gay Talese's, *Frank Sinatra Has A Cold*. He is the founder of modern day, feature writing journalism. I have found that reading these sorts of works push me to challenge myself in what I write.

I do regret that I did not interview Zach in the end. He is quite the character, and so nice, at that. But I do know that you will eventually see him on your television, playing a contemporary jazz set with revolutionary style.

And so, I leave you to sit with this story (more a fun read, than anything), and imagine how his melodies sound... the best way I could describe them are *glorious*.

BIKES UP GUNS DOWN

On teenage angst, wheelies, and the biker boys of West Palm Beach.

— Published as a special to the Florida Weekly newspaper through a freelance journalist venture. It is the Arts & Entertainment section cover story for the Palm Beach community chapter.

Because it is Sunday afternoon at Phipps Park and because all of the biker boys are wearing pink (and also because everyone knows the vibe), no one talks about cops. The biker boys dap each other up and trade Stig flavors while lining single file for the swerve contest against a city of West Palm Beach Solid Waste Authority trash can. Rap music spills from trucks circling round the meetup, legs and wheels dangling out of windows and boys shedding pink for wife beaters in the pre-fall heat. Between mangles of bike parts and screws and pumps, there's a merchandise shop — a table under a sandy pavilion selling shirts or Gatorades by the mothers.

Some spin out against the trash can and scrape elbows, but most chill until 4 p.m., line up and watch wheelies or post on Snapchat or gape at the boy with only a back wheel who is only destined to wheelie.

Even before Steezy's rideout, it smells like sweat and grass and blueberry smoke, and the biker boys only talk about cops when they are ready to ride.

Three months before Steezy's breast cancer rideout, I sat on a mowed lawn, waiting for two boys to show me what street biking looked like.

When they came out of the house wearing fresh shirts and slicked hair, in the dead heat of Florida in late July, we walked to what must be their "destroy mowed lawns and crash bingo gettys" hideout: The neighborhood electrical compounds.

The biker boys gazed on, Adidas swinging. "What are your names?"

"Alex." "Michael."

The interview began.

"Sometimes it'd be funny seeing people react," Alex said, breaking into a smile about swerving cars. "People get mad. It can be stupid. But it's also more like, 'Can I get away with it, and what's going to happen if I do or don't get away?'"

These boys, who like raising their bikes in an arched taunt against cars, who spend their Friday nights in rowdy packs cycling Flagler Drive, who wheelie and swerve and screw with suburbia, who horrify middle-aged white people in middle-class white picket fenced neighborhoods, who flick off the almighty stop sign to put on a show, know they are destroying order. It's part of the appeal.

"We're not smashing windows, right?" Alex reasons. "We're just swerving cars and getting in their way — a little bit."

Getting swerved by a biker boy, I realize in the neighborhood electrical compounds, is to have the pack barrel toward your car in the opposite direction and turn at the very last second. Getting swerved by a biker boy is also a lot of things: cool, annoying, terrifying. My initial guess is that the 17-year-old in us makes swerving not seem so crazy (suburbia is just wilding).

When I meet Mateo — the third member of Alex and Michael's suburban crew — he refuses to be photographed. It is only after I let him swerve my camera and ride on his pegs, that he trusts me. Sort of.

To fully understand biker boys is to fully understand their bikes. Alex, Michael and Mateo exclusively ride SE Bikes, as most every biker boy does. They're shiny, electric and expensive (most every biker boy has pegs, which, once screwed onto an SE Bike, breaks its warranty).

SE Bikes was founded by Scot Breithaup in the early '70s, in Long Beach, California, for the new sport of BMX racing. Though BMX racing requires tracks and teams, BMX street biking utilizes more of the setting that cityscape provides. Both styles of riding wear team jerseys,

where fashion is an integral facet of street bike culture. (The disruption to suburban function now becomes a show, and a fashion one at that.)

Notedly, the street bike movement also has a presence online. Instagram and Snapchat and TikTok run rampant with biker boy content — biker boys swerving cars, falling off bikes, biker boys popping wheelies to Lil Uzi Vert or Pop Smoke. My feed showed rideouts down Flagler Drive (which meant that there were more biker boys outside of suburbia).

It proved easy to find these city biker boys. Their Instagrams are all the same — either oneway.theirname or bikelife.theirname or jrzy.theirname (which stand for bike groups who use social media to post edits of tricks and rideouts).

So I DM'd them. And waited.

My hopes ran high that one of the 25 biker boys I contacted would answer. But my DM's sat on seen, or delivered, or got an "igh" but no follow-through.

It was just when I had given up re-messaging that oneway.tony answered my DM, agreed to let me ride, and met up with me at 2 p.m. on a Saturday.

"If you guys are gonna post this everywhere," Tony tells me — and by the angsty "you," I think he means everyone in the world — "I want to make sure all the West Palm Police Department (sees). They harass us." He sighs as we bike onto safe territory, past the Rosemary Square downtown from which a few of the biker boys (including him) are "banned."

As we pass Publix and CVS and Mandel Public Library, high-rises popping up means construction tra c to swerve. Tony rides next to me while explaining his standing with West Palm Beach law enforcement.

"He's only 9," Tony says, pointing to Isaac, who clarifies he is actually 10. "He's still young. And they fingerprinted us."

All the biker boys laugh. Tony doesn't.

"They fingerprinted a 10-year-old. So that's a little messed up to me."

Jordin — who had just meddled with passersby holding American flags by yelling "Kanye 2020!" and who enjoys flashing his gold chain during wheelies — tries to reason with local law enforcement (even though Jordin swerves cars the most. He recognizes the irony).

"We're tryna stay off the streets and not sell drugs, not be in crimes. We're kind of trying to put kids toward bikes so that way they have something."

Tony interrupts while looking at Isaac. "It's like we're older siblings."

"But the cops still target us, which we don't understand," Jordin says. "We tell them all the time — how come you aren't out here fighting crimes, but you're stopping us on bikes?"

There are claims of criminal reports filed against the biker boys on the neighborhood social network, Next- Door — from foul language to hitting car windows while swerving — which public records requests have failed to confirm.

When I run into a person from my neighborhood who asked to remain anonymous and whose street is outspoken about the biker boys online, their response is succinct.

“It’s a shame,” they tell me in a hushed whisper, mentioning “a big group” that is the biker boys dividing the community. “They’re what we see with Trump and the rioters. They think they can do anything they want and get away with it.”

I mean to tell them that ironically, the SE Bike motto is “We ride as one.” The second they see another neighbor, though, they swiftly switch the topic.

So, I log onto NextDoor, where reading the not-so-succinct threats takes hours.

“I can assure their parents that when it comes to a vehicle versus bike, vehicle wins,” user Adam Konesey said. “When they are unruly and causing trouble,” other user Marilyn Jordan suggested, “the cops should take their bikes away. That might slow down the little punks.” But among the most memorable responses is that of a user on a post that has since been deleted. “One word,” they said. “Taser.”

Undoubtedly, NextDoor user Adam Konesey isn’t wrong that a car will always beat a bike physically. Bicycles also are considered vehicles in Florida. So if someone does get hurt, it’s the biker boys who put themselves and the drivers in danger.

Yet, the threats don’t strike me as coherent when staring at these pubescent boys who talk about crushes and music as much as they talk about getting stopped by law enforcement, who “run up” each other’s Instagram posts and sing out loud to their favorite rap songs.

Back with Tony and Jordin, while sitting beneath an oak tree detaching spare bike parts, they say that despite these challenges, the West Palm Beach street biking scene is big. So are their rideouts.

It is between Clematis Street bars that the biker boys show me their tricks. Bear (Jordin’s little brother) stands at the corner of the four-way Clematis/ Olive intersection near Duffy’s Sports Bar and Grease Burger Bar. He yells when cars are turning so that others know when to swerve. James practices his wheelies around a parked white Lexus. Santa rides a bike with no pegs. Isaac has the thickest wheels and the biggest bike but the smallest body (which I later learn is good for stability), and he competes with the older boys who hop from peg to peg and twist their ankles and release their hands and grind rubber against concrete. The sounds of the abrupt stops, mixed with the honking of cars, makes those drinking Starbucks jolt mid-sip. Pedestrians stop and stare — I run into a classmate and she asks me what’s going on. Where do I start? Jordin is tilting his bike almost vertically toward the sky, his palm skidding against the road, while a white Jeep Wrangler tries to get by him. He chases the car until it turns the corner, and then he pops another wheelie, spinning his front tire and handlebars counterclockwise. Tony’s red bike is gliding forward while he does a trick I am briefly familiar with from the street biker Instagram scene — surfing — where the biker boy puts his front foot on the handlebars and his back foot on the seat. Tony rides straight into the green light, Bear warning him not to veer left, while Isaac and James and Jordin are yelling “Surf! Surf!”

Street biking is, clearly, a team sport.

Sticking with their crew, Jordin admits that “if it wasn’t for bikes, this guy right here? I would have no idea who he is.” And he slings his arm around Tony while laughing at him.

On the way to my last stop with the city crew, a lady flicks us off and honks. It is my fault — I’ve never ridden on the street before — but the biker boys are in uproar. (Tony screams, “What are you gonna do? Hit her?”)

When we get to the Royal Park Bridge to Palm Beach, the only sounds are car engines revving and braking.

Tony walks his bike up the bridge, puts his feet on his seat, stands up against the wind, curses the clouds and the traffic, and holds his knees steady against the speed of the decline. For a moment, Tony seems completely free — the tiny shadows racing to follow — and lets his wheel fly.

The number of tickets and stops and scorn from suburbia, for the biker boys, is hard to count. But there is one name that comes to mind, and it is this: West Palm Beach Police Officer Christopher Fisher. The second I hear about him, everything changes.

Officer Fisher keeps coming up in Snapchats among the bike boys, again and again. I see it on Instagram in a viral video. I read it in reposts, in comments, in the wisps of wind from West Palm Beach patrol cars (but that just might be paranoia).

And though, initially, I cannot pinpoint the start of Officer Fisher this and Officer Fisher that nor the damning statements from angry biker boys, I can watch the viral video in which he arrests oneway_ stephan, a Pennsylvania-based street biker with over 125,000 Instagram followers while visiting West Palm Beach. It plays out something like this:

“Did I tell you to stop?” Officer Fisher asks, grabbing oneway_ stephan by his arm even though he is standing on the sidewalk, motionless.

“What the f–k,” oneway_ stephan says. “This is dumb.” He is seated on the curb while a passerby walks her dog. “What did he do?” the boy off camera asks.

“Fled, when I told him to stop.”

“I stopped. Right on the f–king sidewalk,” oneway_ stephan says. “When I told you the first time?”

“Yes. And I slowed down. Did I stop? Yes. Oh, my God.” Officer Fisher turns to the boy off camera.

“Have a nice day.”

“No, I want to wait for him,” he says.

“Either have a nice day or you can be in the same boat with him.”

“Where do you want me to go? He’s my friend.”

“I don’t care. Have a nice day.”

And Officer Fisher handcuffs oneway_ stephan, who later tells me he gave Officer Fisher a fake ID to avoid four tickets (after finding two of the reports in a police record log, I see his fake identity includes a misspelled first name, but because most biker boys avoid the use of a surname, the latter's veracity cannot be confirmed).

Tony said it was personally "embarrassing." To them, Stephan is a guest.

On a Friday in late September, I go to the West Palm Beach Police Department after school with my backpack still on and a plan (find Officer Fisher) scribbled onto sticky notes. A woman answers the intercom, asks what I need, gives me a 10-digit number to dial (His sergeant, she said), and doesn't let me in.

Officer Fisher's sergeant never called me back.

It was on an evening walk the next week, after seeing a few biker boys pass Rocco's Tacos, asking two West Palm cops whether they knew Officer Fisher to test my luck, waiting for him to answer their calls, and telling me he'd be here in five minutes, that I'd finally reached Officer Fisher.

"What's going on?" he said.

I stuttered through a speech about a project. "What's the story about?"

"Um. Biker boys. You know, the boys who ride bicycles and do tricks? Wheelies, I mean." "You have to talk to my PIO."

"PIO?"

"You have to talk to my PIO." "Sorry, but what is a PIO?"

"Public Information Officer."

"Oh. So, you're not willing to give me a quote?"

"No, I'm not allowed to."

He told me the interaction must be moderated through a PIO.

The next day, when contacted through the West Palm Beach Police Department's PIO, his PIO bantered with the topic of biker boys. "What a headache," he said. And Officer Fisher declined to be interviewed.

As much as the biker boys are infatuated with Officer Fisher, they are crazy about Steezy. In 13 minutes of recorded conversation, Alex declares, "If Steezyfilmz is at a rideout, everyone's going to that rideout." Bear says, "Steezy's like that brother you wish you had," that "he's like family," upon the mention of his name. And with an influx of biker boy Instagram follows thanks to Tony tagging me, my feed became reposts of Steezy's videos over and over again.

Who even is Steezy?

It takes me two days to find him. He's wearing an Uber Eats backpack and riding a white-and-blue-and-pink SE Miami Ripper. Because of his social media presence, I know him exactly when I see him.

On the same street where Tony and Jordin showed me their tricks and where brunch with mimosas saw little noise, following Steezy nearly becomes a race. A fight breaks out at a sushi

restaurant and a homeless man challenges three girls with beers in their hands to a push-up challenge. Cars are blaring their horns and patrol cars are in nearly every alley. The scene on Clematis is starkly different.

Steezy texts, “Can you meet me on Flagler by the docks” and at 7:30, we meet to talk on his route delivering to the Palm Beach Atlantic University campus.

Steezy — who goes by Steezy only and is 20 years old — went to Forest Hill High and has been street biking since he was 7. He grew up riding with Jordin, Tony and Isaac’s older brother.

“They do look up to me and I look after them,” Steezy says. “If I’m there and I see them doing something dumb, they know I’m like — yo, chill out. There was times where West Palm Beach police are trying to chase them down. And I’m like, you know what, y’all just do this, then they’ll leave you alone, and they learn from that.”

“They’re my little brothers,” he adds, before explaining that whenever there are police encounters, he never bikes away and always pays the ticket.

And when I mention Officer Fisher, Steezy laughs.

“We go way back with Fisher,” Steezy says of the officer who worked in neighboring town of Lake Clarke Shores, in which eight of the 12 reports I found occurred. “Fisher was known as the helmet cop, always giving kids on bikes tickets for no helmets. He didn’t have nothing better to do and that’s what really made us grow a hatred.”

Steezy insists that he has no issue with the West Palm Beach Police Department, though, but that Officer Fisher “does make some of them look bad.”

Steezy counts his sponsors for me on his fingers and has to backtrack two times. His sponsors (some bike shops, some not) provide him with decals, clothing apparel, and sometimes, payment. His Youtube channel, Steezy Filmz, has over 30,000 subscribers, and his Instagram 40,000 followers.

Somewhere between the time Breithaup and Perry Kramer made the PK Ripper bike and Steezy pops wheelies for me, it became the biggest sensation of a BMX bike known to the industry.

Bob Haro, who also grew up in California and used his bicycle skills for odd-job stunts in ET (the movie) is considered a revolutionary in his efforts to bring the sport to the street and skateparks for televised events (like the Olympics and X-Games), creating a source of income. Because of Haro, biker boys could be biker boys by occupation (like Steezy).

Team riders for SE Bikes are famous for swerving next to police cars in videos, but also for handing out bikes to kids on the street, randomly. Steezy says SE Bikes has not sponsored him “yet,” and he alludes to the future (In January, he becomes an SE Bikes team rider).

As much as biking is a source of income, it is also a big part of Steezy’s being.

“I used to deal with a lot of anxiety. Riding my bike would really help with that,” Steezy says in front of the PBAU sign. “I’ve been riding since I was a kid and that’s all I could ever do. I came from a rough, rough neighborhood.”

I try to ask more about this (as well as later, over Instagram DMs), but Steezy remains reserved. He mentions that he grew up with his mom, and struggled, though she was always supportive. He doesn't tell me his real name and mentions nothing past the words "rough" or "dangerous."

When I press to learn more (about his coming of age, biker boy tale) Steezy shrugs it off. Akin to the other biker boys, it feels like we are riding in circles.

"Riding bikes was all I could do," he says, and leaves it at that.

After he pops some wheelies for me, Steezy asks if my bike lights are working. "It gets crazy out there," he says, pointing to Clematis in the dark. "Be safe."

The indie summer moments with pegs and bridges and riding, wouldn't last me long. I could tell as soon as I had the biker boys on Snapchat.

My feed went from watching my girlfriends stress about the latest physics test, to boys swerving cars in traffic. The biker boys tagged me in their stories. I reposted bike surfing with the proper emojis. I had almost become a biker boy — girl — myself.

And the problem lies in almost. As much as I try to pry, the biker boys swerve most of my questions. Expertly, too. My attempts at getting to know them (j curious, where do u work?) feel like two steps forward (Mateo is typing...) and three steps back (lol). It doesn't take a genius. The biker boys have a line that I cannot cross unless I'm on their pegs.

I don't know who is allowed to go to the rideouts or what the rules are, but I do know I am the only girl riding with them. (Out of 12 team riders on the SE Bike website, two are girls.) I kid with Steezy that I should get an SE Bike, and he tells me, "I mean, why not? You'll probably be the only girl doing it in West Palm Beach."

Despite this, my friends are hesitant. Maybe it's the bike-versus-car barrier, or maybe the no-ticket track record, but most people I text vehemently don't want to go to the rideouts with me.

But the funny thing is, the biker boys compare to my friends more so than any other clique. They hug each other and have sleepovers before rideouts and love posting on social media. In many ways, I'm friends with the biker boys just as much as with my own friends, except that we're on bikes.

In early September, Steezy sends me a confidential flier for his upcoming rideout. Everyone's invited. There's just one catch for which Steezy's friends will kick any biker boy out: Not wearing pink for breast cancer awareness. (Though, unaffiliated with an actual breast cancer organization, it is just a lot of biker boys wearing pink.)

On Oct. 25, all of the biker boys wear pink. Some of them show up two, three, four hours early to set up with Steezy. Tony and I snap the night before (we discuss fits, bikes, and, well, Steezy). Rideouts see all types of crews. Here, there must be hundreds.

Steezy and Jordin stand on the roof of the truck trading cameras to film the swerve contest, promising winners T-shirts or 25 bucks. Jordin's dad has Jordin's name tattooed on one hand and his little brother's, Bear, tattooed on the other. Both are etched in cursive.

There's a little boy with them, also, and Jordin pats his shoulder, introducing him to the older boys.

I run into Tony, wearing a Steezy- Filmz shirt and beanie, rather quickly. He is visibly flustered with the sheer vastness of biker boys. He tells me he'll be at the front of the pack, but "I'll look out for you either way." He bikes off to find his little brother.

Before we leave, there's a boy there who wipes out swerving — his name is Robert — and his face looks covered in paint more so than blood. He wakes up in a truck only after the pack comes back from the rideout, and later gets a cast on his hand.

I'd tell you the front of the pack is like the eye of a hurricane, what with all the tricks and speed and odd serenity of wheeling against a sea breeze. Or at least that the more up front you get, the more wheels are flying. Almost like a biker boy mosh pit.

But as soon as the pack crosses Dixie and turns onto Olive, I am the last biker in the pack. They're just fast.

In fact, until the pack crosses Clematis, where Tony hitches a boost on the UHaul truck — a friend of Steezy's, no doubt — and Brandon pops wheelies, I don't talk to anybody.

The two boys left behind with me are Brandon and Oscar, who both drove down from Miami to the rideout. It's Oscar's first rideout, he says, and they wheelie while we reach South Ocean Boulevard seven minutes behind everybody.

"The 'trol's here!"

Bear is biking opposite of where the pack is headed, with a boy named Jayden. "The 'trol!"

"What?"

"The puh-trol," Bear enunciates between heaves. "They've surrounded them." I've never seen the biker boys panicked.

Jayden is spinning around looking for lights. Oscar is arranging for transportation on his phone. Bear is screaming to follow him on a side street off Worth Avenue, to escape the Gucci and Pucci and Tiffany foot traffic. Whatever street describes itself as "an enchanting resort destination [of] European sophistication and inimitable style and grace," it is there that biker boys find it inherently hard to hide fluorescent SE Bikes.

By the time we pass Worth Avenue, we're left with one question — how does a biker boy plot an escape off an island whose main bridge is lined with police?

Oscar's '99 Ford F-150, it turns out, is the escape vehicle. If we move fast enough.

Bear and Jayden load bikes into the truck — Oscar's dad revs the engine — while Brandon hoists me up. My mom's so going to kill me for sitting in a random truck bed. Naturally, I don't hesitate.

Bear offers us his rideout Ibuprofen supply and Oscar tosses us frozen waters while Jayden is sending photos of the situation to girls (Why isn't Kids in America playing?). We duck between lights where Palm Beach cop cars might be. Oscar opens the back window and is directing his parents in Spanish. "La puente! La puente!" until the '99 Ford F150 crosses the Flagler Memorial Bridge.

Here, the biker boys hold onto their bikes.

Once everyone meets back from Palm Beach, but before the 6:58 p.m. TriRail train to Miami, which Palm Beach Daily News will tell you was a "cavalcade" and "small army" of biker boys who were "utterly disrespectful" and with "no identified leader," Steezy buys everyone pizza and chips.

I meet oneway_stephan, who signs boys' shirts and bikes. He laughs when I mention Officer Fisher.

In time for school, I slap a Riot Rides sticker onto my phone half-haphazardly. It's red, white and blue, with little stars and block letters and says YKTFV. "You know the f-king vibe," leader of Riot Rides Shane says, "is what all the kids are saying. So, I put it on our political sticker."

On a rainy Thursday afternoon one week earlier, I get a phone notification. @oneway.jordin has followed you on Instagram. His bio reads, "BIKES UP GUNS DOWN." It's ironic because the BY CYCLE Boynton Beach bike shop that carries SE Bikes is right next to a gun store. It's also ironic because so many people — Next Door users, Officer Fisher, Officer Fisher's PIO, my friends — all suggest that the biker boys are violent. But the biker boys are nothing like that at all.

When I ask Jordin and Bear about this, they tell me that when they're on their bikes, they are brothers to themselves but also to Steezy and Tony and the crew. They tell me that they ride as one, like the SE Bike motto. And, really, that they're just boys on bikes, staying out of trouble.

REFLECTION

This story — a whirlwind of adventure — most definitely caused my mother numerous heart attacks. I greatly enjoyed reporting these boys' stories, as local news coverage failed to interview them. But I also enjoyed getting to know these biker boys personally, in part due to our shared angst towards suburbia's compelling order.

I am inclined to end with this story because it is my first experience pitching and publishing with a professional publication. I am grateful to the Florida Weekly and my editor, Scott Simmons, for taking a chance on this story, as much mine as belonging to that of the too cool, real-life biker boys of West Palm Beach.

I spent months re-working these paragraphs, of finding a balance between the disarray left in the wake of their wheelies. When it uploaded, and we re-shared the link on NextDoor, the

reactions varied. Some were angry about these boys, and told me to “get lost”. Others shared my affinity towards this brotherhood and their common sport.

Whatever the case, if you find yourself getting swerved, enjoy the moment. It is chaotic and beautiful and most importantly, fast. You blink, and these boys are already swerving someone else.

LE FIN

At their most honest state, words have always been my most coveted currency.

Elena Ferrante is my favorite author as of late — a pseudonymous Italian whose mantra surrounds the separation of her identity from her books. According to her, a good piece of writing should stand by itself.

This facet of Ferrante’s interviews irked me incessantly throughout high school. I think the current ire comes with being an angsty teen girl, newly 18 and hungry for journalistic success. How could someone not name their own work? Who am I, really, if not bound to the identity of my words?

Though, I have some blind belief in this mysterious Italian identity, whose continuous stream of works allows me to trust her. She keeps writing. So now my journey as a writer starts with signing the page at the end, when I know my stories have earned their ground first. I’ll know to sign when all the right words find their place. It will be a feeling in my bones.