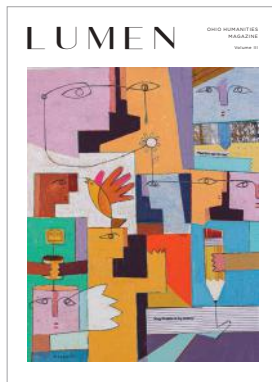


# LUMEN

OHIO HUMANITIES  
MAGAZINE

Volume III





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COVER ART BY JEREMY ROSARIO

*Lumen* (ISSN 2998-1751) is a publication of Ohio Humanities, a nonprofit dedicated to sharing stories, sparking conversations and inspiring ideas.

*Lumen* aims to build and foster community through thoughtfully curated storytelling that shows the humanities at play today, highlights noteworthy humans throughout Ohio and dares to examine big questions and ideas.

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### *LET'S CONNECT*



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PHOTO BY KILEY KINNARD

# *Being Seen*

The margins of my books are tattooed with ink scribbles.

Reading something that perfectly communicates a feeling or thought I have wrestled with reminds me I am not alone.

That I am not the only one carrying shame and regret in the same body where I carry curiosity and joy. That there is beauty in embracing the full spectrum of my humanity.

I feel seen.

Feeling seen and understood in someone else's story – whether it's within the pages of a book, the words of a poem or the scenes in a documentary film – unlocks an incredible sense of connection to others, especially in moments of loneliness.

As our team worked on this issue of Lumen, we kept coming back to our own experiences of feeling seen in the humanities. Those moments when your breath catches, or a tear wells, or you laugh out loud, or you send a snapshot of a passage from a book to the group chat followed simply by, “THIS!”

This issue of Lumen, which explores the idea of being seen, is our most courageous yet. Inside, you will read stories that evoke a range of emotions. There's thoughtfulness and joy in the way Columbus Crew Coach Wilfried Nancy defines and approaches winning. There's pain and an inspiring commitment to culture from Native Americans whose ancestors were forcibly removed from their Ohio homelands. There's heartache and bravery in navigating terminal illness.

At times, you may find this issue difficult to read, as we tackle subjects that often make

people uncomfortable, from racism to sex trafficking. But our hope is that by sharing perspectives from a breadth of people, we can more fully experience our shared humanity.

We are grateful to all those who helped us curate meaningful stories for this issue. We are grateful to all those within these pages who are courageously stepping into the light to make their voices heard. And we are grateful for people like Nicole Robinson, whose work in narrative medicine – which you can read about in “Powerful Prescription” – is helping others feel seen. It is an honor to fund and support passionate people like Nicole and others who you will meet in this issue.

The humanities are, by definition, a set of disciplines that explore society and culture. But at their core, they are the study of us as humans. And I can think of nothing more human than feeling seen.

I hope this issue helps you see – and feel seen, too.

**Rebecca Brown Asmo**  
*Executive Director, Ohio Humanities*

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# HUMANITIES AT PLAY

There are thoughtful, brilliant humanists sparking conversations and inspiring ideas statewide. Here, get personal with three of them.

*By David Merkowitz  
& Kristy Eckert*



3  
PEOPLE  
TO  
KNOW





# WILFRIED NANCY

*The expressive Frenchman – a one-time professional footballer now coaching the Columbus Crew – stood beaming on the pitch at Lower.com Field, basking in the overwhelming joy of his team’s Major League Soccer championship. On that night in late 2023, in his first year with the Crew, Wilfried Nancy had just become the first Black coach to win an MLS Cup. And he did it by orchestrating a style of soccer that many consider the most interesting soccer being played in North America – a delicate balance of patience, freedom and moments of explosive action. “Impossible,” Nancy declared, “is an opinion.” The quote was on a T-shirt within days, and suddenly, the secret was out: Nancy is not just a coach but also a philosopher. The native of Le Havre, France, now lives in Dublin, Ohio, with his wife and two children. In conversation, one senses a person who has spent a lot of time thinking about how to establish an environment for total success – not just on the pitch in a given game, but across a career and even a life.*

## WHAT LIGHTS YOU UP?

I would say to write my own story in this infinite game.

## WHAT FRUSTRATES YOU?

When people complain about something that they cannot control. Sometimes, you know, people get emotional, and they waste a lot of time being emotional instead of trying to move forward. I’m not saying moving forward is easy. My job is to help the players realize that it doesn’t help to complain about the things you cannot change or control. Adjust yourself. Move forward.

## WHAT MAKES YOU LAUGH?

It’s spontaneous things that make me laugh, so I never know what it will be. In the past, I didn’t want to show my emotions. I didn’t want to laugh even in good moments, and I didn’t want to cry. But thanks to my wife and kids, I’ve learned to accept these kinds of emotions, because it allows me to be true to what’s happening.

## WHAT PROFESSIONAL MISSION ARE YOU ON?

For me, it’s really important to be aligned with my values. So, my vision is not to win

# I BELIEVE THAT THE WAY WE PLAY CAN ALSO INSPIRE MY PLAYERS TO BECOME BETTER PEOPLE.

—WILFRIED NANCY

games or anything. It is more to achieve what I want to achieve by being myself. The vision is to win in a certain way, because I believe that the way we play can also inspire my players to become better people.

## *WHY IS HUMAN CONNECTION SO IMPORTANT IN YOUR WORK?*

It is key. Before I started coaching, I thought that if I'm good tactically, everything will be OK. No. To be a good coach, you have to understand people. My job is to understand what you can do and how I can take your expertise and use it. All players – all people – want to do well. If you choose the right people, they will do well if you give them autonomy – if you give them freedom within the structure.

## *WHAT IS A MEMORABLE MOMENT FROM CHILDHOOD?*

Throughout my youth, my father was in the French Navy, so I traveled a lot. One year in one place, two years in another. I'm grateful to my parents, because I had that luxury. It allows me to understand more people and to be more open and to have more empathy.

## *WHAT PROFESSIONAL WORK ARE YOU PASSIONATE ABOUT?*

First, I have a clear way I want us to play: Be brave. Be bold. Play with joy. Create a story and feelings for the crowd and each other. Second, know myself. In my job, everybody has an opinion. So I have to be strong and clear with ideas. I close my eyes sometimes and open them when needed.

*WHO DO YOU LOVE TO LEARN FROM?*

Everyone. Because of my background, I have friends who spent time in jail and friends who are presidents of countries. I learn from everyone.

*WHAT HAVE YOU COME TO LOVE ABOUT OHIO?*

This is exactly what I like. Columbus is a peaceful city for my family. In Dublin, where I live, it is green everywhere. The traffic is easy. The people are so kind – and respectful of my privacy. We have all kinds of diversity. I went to the Pro Musica Columbus concert with Jon Batiste. I loved it for the creativity, and I was happy to see all kinds of people in the theater. My kids are in a French immersion school, which they love. I'm really, really happy to be here.

*WHAT ARE YOU CERTAIN IS TRUE?*

Nonverbal communication is really important.

*WHAT SINGLE MISSION WOULD YOU MOBILIZE PEOPLE AROUND IF YOU COULD?*

Try to be less selfish. The ego is normal, we need our ego to achieve something. But as soon as we put our egos on the side, we become able to achieve many things.

*HOW DO YOU MAKE A TEAM OUT OF A GROUP OF PEOPLE FROM SUCH DISPARATE BACKGROUNDS ALL OVER THE WORLD?*

I try to create a safe environment. I encourage them to be true to who they are as a person. We have Muslim players. We have players who don't like to eat certain things. We have players who, in their culture, have to do certain things. So the idea is to have a clear vision as a team, but within that, to create a space where individuals can be themselves. The first thing I do every year is a meeting where we talk about core values. I advise each player: Compete with yourself, not against anybody. Compete with yourself to become a better me all the time. And have joy. Without joy, we cannot compete.

*IF PEOPLE DEFINED YOU WITH JUST ONE WORD, WHAT DO YOU HOPE IT WOULD BE?*

Wise.

WISE





# TONI SHORTER SMITH

*Toni Shorter Smith has championed African-American culture in Ohio in profound ways. Among other work, she mobilized and trained a team of 30 volunteers to research and document African-American settlements in Central Ohio for Columbus Landmarks. She was instrumental in creating the Aminah Robinson Legacy Project with the Columbus Museum of Art, which honors the late artist's legacy by offering a fellowship and residency at her incredible, art-filled home. And she produced a video series highlighting African-American composers for Opera Project Columbus – plus took some of its musicians to Paris to perform excerpts of Vanqui, an emotional opera about two Africans enslaved in America. Now, she splits her time between Columbus and Oxford, where she is teaching at Miami University as a visiting assistant professor. Here, the mother and grandmother shares passions, frustrations, defining moments and more.*

## *WHAT LIGHTS YOU UP?*

I love collaborating with others to undertake a creative project.

## *WHAT FRUSTRATES YOU?*

People's limited vision of what we can do together. I am, by nature, a very optimistic person. When brainstorming with others, we can come up with great ideas. Sometimes we can be intimidated by the size of the project: "Oh, that will cost too much" or "I don't know if I can do that." These are all normal thoughts. But often the bigness of the idea is what is exciting about it. I get frustrated by those who won't see the possibilities or agree to

work on big ideas with me and others. I remember once approaching a friend who was in a position of authority and asking for her help with a project. She laughed and said, "Toni, you've always got to ask for something hard." I thought, If it was easy, I wouldn't need to ask for your help.

## *WHAT PROFESSIONAL MISSION ARE YOU ON?*

I am on a mission to put very smart and/or talented people in front of people who can learn and are willing to be inspired, be entertained, be provoked to think, be healed.



LOVE IS MORE  
POWERFUL  
THAN  
HATE, AND  
INDIVIDUAL  
PARTICIPATION  
BY ALL IS  
WHAT WILL  
SAVE US.

—TONI  
SHORTER  
SMITH ””

*WHAT PERSONAL MISSION ARE YOU ON?*

To do all I said in the previous response while keeping the lines off my face. I also have a mission to contribute culturally to the expansion of our collective understanding of what it is to be human.

*WHY IS HUMAN CONNECTION SO IMPORTANT?*

Human connection is important, because without it, there is no compassion, little understanding or empathy, minimal change.

*WHAT IS A MEMORABLE MOMENT FROM YOUR CHILDHOOD?*

I grew up with three brothers in a household that discussed issues of the day at the dinner table. Even though I was the only girl, my two cents were always considered just as important as that of my brothers. As I got older – still elementary school age but beyond the inclusive environs of my home – I still contributed my two cents to conversations that my brothers and their male friends were having, just as I did at the dinner table. After one such discussion, I heard one of the boys who lived down the street saying to another boy, “Toni talks too much!” I was shocked. Nobody in my household ever made me feel like I talked too much. In fact, my family seemed to enjoy and encourage my thinking and participation in our family discussions. That one remark was my introduction to what I later came to know as sexism. As

a result, I began to pay attention to how my girlfriends' and my contributions to intellectual discussions were received. I became keenly aware of how some men responded to women who are thinkers. And that made me consider how much further along in our society we could be in various areas of development if women's contributions were considered as valuable as those of men. It shaped my embrace of equity and equality more broadly than just for African Americans but also for women, differently abled people, gay people, etc.

*WHO IS ONE PERSON THAT MADE A POWERFUL MARK ON YOUR LIFE?*

My mother probably made the most powerful mark on my life, because she was very forward-thinking. My brothers were required to cook and clean just like me. She practiced yoga, exercised all her life and studied astrology as well as her own religion of Christianity. She was always developing herself. She studied herbs and vitamins in an effort to improve her health and that of my father. She went door to door to create our community association that still exists today. She volunteered for the only Black nursing home in town. And she did all this while remaining stylish and fashion-forward.

*WHO DO YOU LOVE TO LEARN FROM?*

I love learning from scholars who have devoted years to mining a particular subject. For example, I love hearing Ohio State Professor Emeritus Ted McDaniel talk about jazz, or Ohio State Professor Hasan Jeffries talk about the Civil Rights era, or Miami University Professor Tammy Kernodle talk about American music.

*WHY DO YOU LOVE OHIO?*

I love Ohio because it imbued me with a love of the four seasons and what I was told are "good Midwestern values."

*WHAT ONE PERSON DO YOU WISH EVERY OHIOAN KNEW?*

Artist Aminah Robinson, who represents the best of what Ohio has to contribute. I also would highlight Steven Anderson, who for years wrote and produced plays for children at Phoenix Theater for Children, which later merged with CATCO and is now The Contemporary Theatre of Ohio. His plays helped introduce children to those "good Midwestern values" that will stay with them for life.

*WHAT ARE YOU CERTAIN IS TRUE?*

Love is more powerful than hate, and individual participation by all is what will save us.

*IF THERE IS A SINGLE MISSION YOU COULD MOBILIZE PEOPLE AROUND, WHAT WOULD IT BE?*

To become an informed citizenry that participates in the development of our society.

*IF PEOPLE DEFINED YOU WITH ONE WORD, WHAT DO YOU HOPE THAT WORD IS?*

Zeal.

**ZEAL**



# MIKE CAREY

*Mike Carey was raised on a family farm in Sabina, Ohio, which he credits for instilling in him the values of hard work and community. He earned his history degree from The Ohio State University and followed family tradition by serving as a military officer before spending more than two decades as an advocate for coal miners. Now, he is a Republican Congressman who represents Ohio's 15th district, which includes Madison County and parts of Clark, Fayette, Franklin, Miami and Shelby counties. An avid supporter of the humanities, he co-chairs the Congressional Humanities Caucus. He is a husband and father of three who lives in Columbus and is passionate about history, music, faith, family and the Buckeyes. "I like to think I'm a good Catholic," he said. "But I'm probably a better Buckeye fan."*

## WHAT LIGHTS YOU UP?

I'm a big history nut. I love Ohio history, American history, world history. So anything historical. Classical music. I like jazz. The Beatles – and John Lennon's solo career. Crosby, Stills & Nash.

## WHAT FRUSTRATES YOU?

From the perspective of being in Congress, I get frustrated with members who come to Congress who don't want to legislate – who don't want to work across the aisle to get things done.

## WHAT MAKES YOU LAUGH?

I think the hardest I've laughed in the last two years is listening to my middle son, who is 5, talk to my 2-year-old. We took them to a monster truck rally, because my 2-year-old likes monster trucks. He just kept saying, "Monster trucks loud! Monster trucks loud!" He couldn't go in; he was crying. The 5-year-old was like, "Miles, we came here for you. We're doing this for you, buddy."

*WHAT PROFESSIONAL MISSION ARE YOU ON?*

I'd like to bring a level of civility back to the nation's capital. And I want to preserve our small towns but also make sure we don't hollow out our cities. So I want to work on issues that affect housing. Columbus is one of the fastest-growing cities in the U.S., and I'd like to try to make sure we can make housing affordable to the folks relocating to Central Ohio.

*WHY IS HUMAN CONNECTION SO IMPORTANT?*

I think it's the only connection. Last night, I had a bipartisan dinner. We sat down. I'm a firm believer that we can agree to disagree, but we don't have to be disagreeable.

*WHAT IS A MEMORABLE MOMENT FROM YOUR CHILDHOOD?*

My mother packing up our Saab in 1981 and moving from Cincinnati to Sabina. It was an hour car ride but a life-changing experience for me. To move

from downtown Cincinnati to a 500-acre farm was completely different. I was 10. All of a sudden, I was taking farm animals to the county fair. I played pee wee football. I became the captain of the football team at my high school. I live in downtown Columbus now, but I appreciate the country. And I still love going to the county fairs. I still love participating in agricultural forums. It just gave me an interesting perspective. It opened my mind in many ways to how most people live in this country.

*WHO IS ONE PERSON THAT MADE A POWERFUL MARK ON YOUR LIFE?*

My stepdad. He was a farmer. Good guy. That's where the Carey comes from in my name. If I was five minutes late coming home on a curfew, he was the first to meet me at the door. He had me do things on the farm – taught me about hard work and being focused on getting the job done. But he was also, along with my mom, probably the biggest advocate for me to stay in piano lessons and acting lessons and do plays.

*WHAT PROJECT OR WORK ARE YOU MOST PASSIONATE ABOUT, AND WHY?*

Historic preservation. I think it's important to understand our past, because if we don't understand our past, it's hard to dictate where we're going to go in the future. So preserving the structures and preserving history – whether it's written or oral – is important for future generations.



GENUINE



I'M A FIRM BELIEVER THAT  
WE CAN AGREE TO DISAGREE,  
BUT WE DON'T HAVE TO BE  
DISAGREEABLE.

—MIKE CAREY



*WHO DO YOU LOVE TO LEARN FROM?*

I've read a lot of books over the years. One I'll share is *Democracy in America* by (Frenchman) Alexis de Tocqueville. He wrote that the beauty of this country wasn't the agencies; it wasn't the government. It was just the nature of the people of this country. It's the charities, the things we do to help our fellow man. That was uniquely American to him. It wasn't the government interfering; it was the people understanding the freedoms we have.

*WHY DO YOU LOVE OHIO?*

What's not to love? I mean, we've got everything. We've got beautiful rivers. We have a beautiful lake. Wonderful cities. Small towns that dot every part of the state. We've got a wonderful immigrant community. My family is part Italian; they came to Cleveland. I think that's the beauty of Ohio: It's a place where people can afford to follow their dreams. We have wonderful sports teams. If you're an outdoorsman,

there's plenty of facilities. We've got great parks and recreation. Our motto's "The heart of it all," and we truly are.

*WHAT ARE YOU CERTAIN IS TRUE?*

The love of a child.

*IF THERE IS A SINGLE MISSION YOU COULD MOBILIZE PEOPLE AROUND, WHAT WOULD IT BE?*

From the standpoint of being in Congress, it's civility. No one party has a monopoly on good ideas. And it's very easy to find people on both sides of the aisle that will shout at the rain all day, but it's harder to reach across party lines and find something that works for all the American people. I think that's what we as legislators have to do.

*IF PEOPLE DEFINED YOU WITH ONE WORD, WHAT DO YOU HOPE THAT WORD IS?*

Genuine.

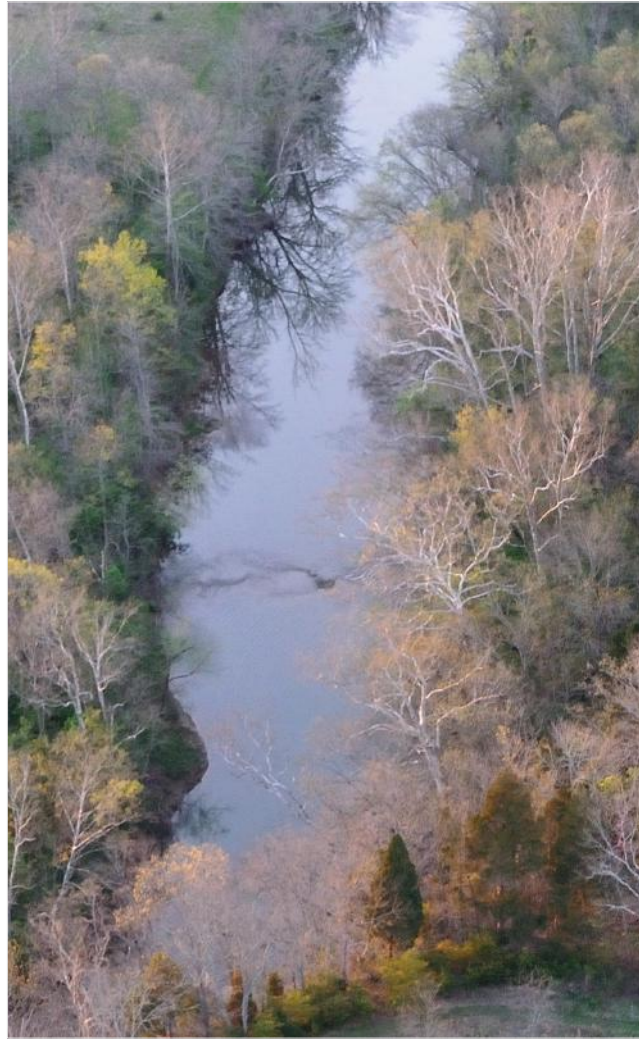
# Sacred Soul

The descendants of American Indian Nations removed from their Ohio homelands reflect on the sacredness of ancient earthworks – and say they have much to teach us even today.

*By Aaron Rován*

Stacey Halfmoon felt the crisp air whisk across her face as she made her way beneath the canopy of barren tree branches. She was in Highbanks, one of the Columbus Metro Parks. Originally from Oklahoma, Halfmoon had grown to love these trails, where she often came to feel grounded and meditate.

The lyrics of Bob Marley, one of her mother's favorite artists, came to mind.



*Don't worry 'bout a thing,  
'cause every little thing gonna be all right.*

Halfmoon's mom had a particular fondness for classic rock. The Beatles, Fleetwood Mac, Chuck Mangione, Neil Young: These artists seemed to play on a loop in their Oklahoma home.

Now, as Halfmoon treaded a trail strewn with colorful leaves, she sang Bob Marley

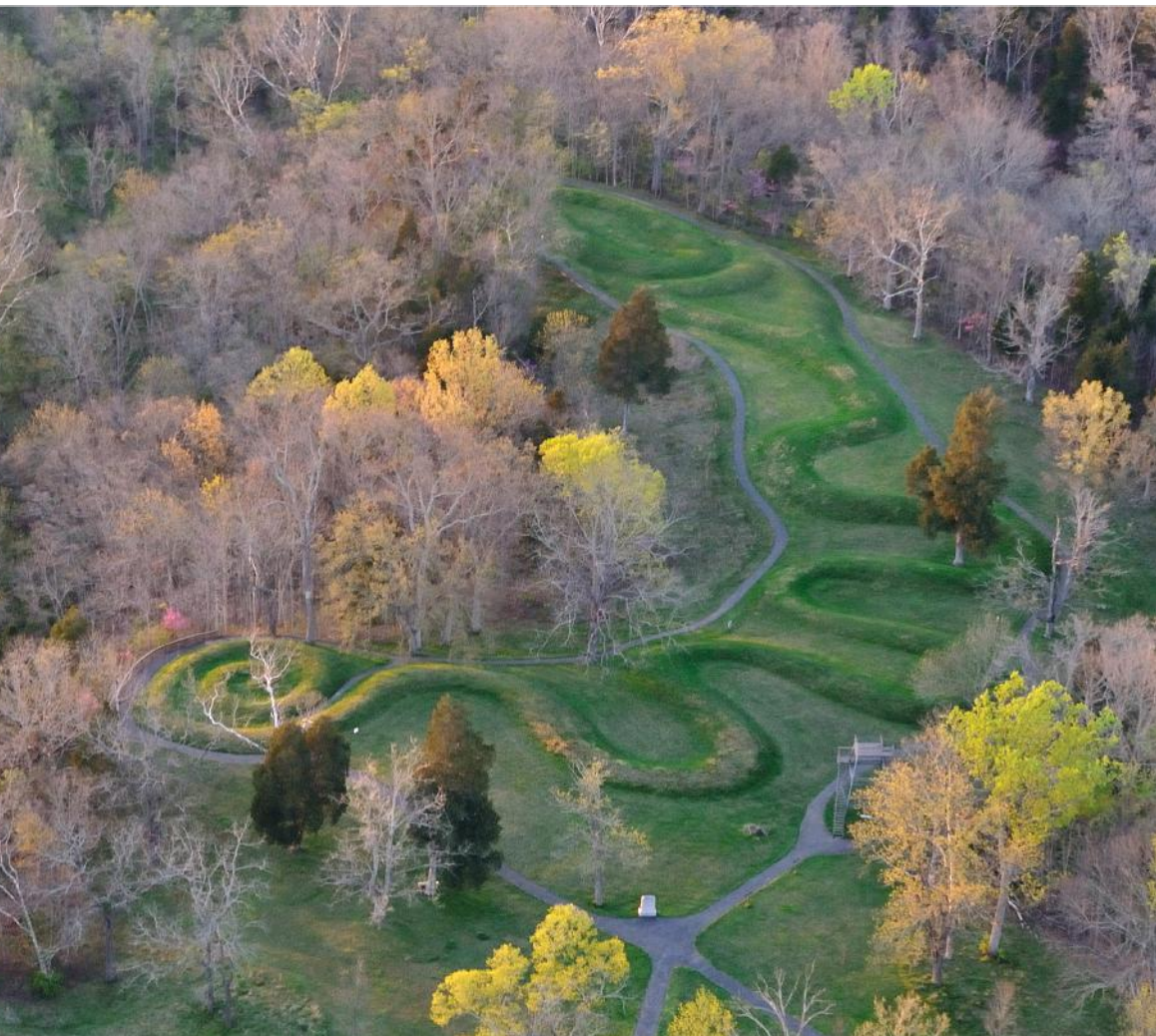


PHOTO BY TIMOTHY E. BLACK

in her head and felt the warmth of her mother.

It was just the comfort she needed.

Her mother had passed away weeks earlier in Oklahoma. Halfmoon, a citizen of the Caddo Nation, had returned to be with family and her tribal community as they buried her. Now, she was back in Ohio, where she had moved to serve as the first

The Great Serpent Mound, located in Southern Ohio, is one of the most recognizable effigy mounds in American archaeology. Experts have not yet determined its origins, but many archaeologists believe that it was constructed about 1,000 years ago, significantly later than the Hopewell culture. Although it is not part of the Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks, additional efforts are underway to have it added to the UNESCO World Heritage list.



Guests explore Octagon Earthworks in Newark.

Director of American Indian Relations at the Ohio History Connection. She knew that in this role, she could help the organization steer a course toward more meaningful and richer relationships with Tribal Nations affiliated with Ohio.

So on that particular day, instead of feeling isolated at her home half a country away from where she was raised, she drove to Highbanks to visit her ancestors.

They had been exactly here, in this spot

that overlooks the Olentangy River from a high bank, thousands of years ago. They loved this area so much that they built a crescent-shaped earthwork – a long, low ridge that stretches nearly a quarter mile. It is almost invisible unless you know to look for it.

And there, on that hallowed ground, she found solace both spiritual and physical. There, she sensed the presence of ancestors, a feeling she had encountered at other ancient sites scattered across the nation.



PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER DAWSON

It is why she visited Highbanks – to feel a connection to something beyond herself. And she did.

Halfmoon’s experience resonates with many other Native Americans who have visited the sites of Ohio’s earthworks. From hidden mounds, like the one in Highbanks, to more visible and celebrated ones like the Great Circle and Octagon in Newark, these ancient structures bring hope to many Native Americans.

Dr. John Low, Director of The Ohio State University’s Newark Earthworks Center and a citizen of the Potawatomi Nation, recognizes the power of these ridges of earth.

“They inspire a sense of awe and pride in Indigenous people,” he said.

In his work stewarding the Newark earthworks site, Low encounters the earthworks daily – driving to work, going to dinner. Yet they never disappear as background scenery to him.

“I’m inspired every time I see them. It never fails,” he said. “I often just stare at them, because they are so cool.”

But many non-Native Ohioans fail to see the earthworks for what they are: a remnant of a magnificent, intelligent culture that populated the American continent over 2,000 years ago. These structures are geometrically precise. They reflect the complex movements of the sun and moon. And they have the potential to connect humans across location and time.

For centuries, these earthworks have been viewed by white settlers as little more than piles of dirt. Certainly, these monumental ceremonial centers can appear deceptively simple or, as in the case of some sites, even hidden. But as Brad Lepper, senior archaeologist for the Ohio History Connection’s World Heritage Program, observes, they are majestic.

“The Hopewell earthworks are piles of earth in the same way that the Parthenon is a pile of rocks,” Lepper said. “We’re blinded by our expectations of what ancient

monuments should look like. We think they should be made of stone, and they should go up into the sky.”

Unlike the Greek Parthenon or the Roman Colosseum – monuments that are strikingly tall and stand out against their surrounding environment – the Hopewell earthworks are splayed massively across the landscape. The Newark site, for example, originally covered 4.5 square miles, most of that being open space enclosed by earthworks ridges. The Great Circle, perhaps the most iconic of the earthworks, is 1200 feet in diameter, which is the equivalent of four football fields.

The materials they are constructed from also factor into their seeming invisibility. They are made of earth – not stone, marble or metal. The Hopewell people, a precursor civilization to today’s diverse Native American Nations, used earth because it is an element that was sacred to them. Low is careful to say that the Hopewell did not build with “dirt” but rather with “earth.”

“Earth is a relative, a grandparent,” Low said. “It’s a deep relationship.”

He uses a phrase: We walk on the bones of our ancestors.

“We say that with pride, because we’ve been here since the beginning,” Low said. “We can’t step anywhere without stepping where our ancestors stepped.”

**T**he late summer march to Cincinnati had been brutal.

It was 1843, and the Wyandot were the last Tribe to be removed from the state. They followed others like the Miami, the

Shawnee, the Seneca, the Ottawa and others in being forced to relocate to the Indian Country of Oklahoma or other plains states.

Reverend James Wheeler, a Methodist, had volunteered to accompany the Wyandot Tribe on their trek from the northwest corner of Ohio to Cincinnati. He recorded the experiences in a journal.

White settlers, he noted, gathered to gawk at the Native people and then steal from them as they slept. Tribal members swooned in the July heat. An elderly Native woman fell ill a few days before reaching Cincinnati.

Ten days after departing from northwest Ohio, the group had finally arrived on the banks of the Ohio River.

As the boat’s whistle sounded and the crew prepared to steer a course south, the elderly woman who had fallen ill may have looked wistfully out across the water. Perhaps she couldn’t bear to leave the place she had called home. Within moments of boarding the boat, she took her last breath.

The Wyandot had built homes on this land. They had cultivated crops, and they had harvested fauna from the forests. And they had also built thriving economic centers before white settlers forced their removal.

Native Tribes weren’t primitive, says Rebecca S. Wingo, Associate Professor of History and Director of Public History at University of Cincinnati.

“They had built up economic infrastructure,” Wingo said, “until white settlers wanted it.”



The Octagon Earthworks, including the Observatory Circle and the octagonal enclosure, are in Newark and have a golf course built on top.

PHOTO BY TIMOTHY E. BLACK

## UNESCO Earthworks

In late 2023 – after a decades-long effort led in part by Chief Glenna J. Wallace of the Eastern Shawnee Tribe – eight earthworks sites in central and southern Ohio received the prestigious designation of inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

The UNESCO committee recognized the outstanding universal value of these sites, calling them highly complex masterpieces of landscape architecture. Said UNESCO: “They are exceptional amongst ancient earthworks worldwide not only in their enormous scale and wide geographic distribution, but also in their geometric precision.”

These eight Ohio earthworks are now UNESCO World Heritage sites:

- Octagon Earthworks, Newark
- Great Circle Earthworks, Newark
- Hopeton Earthworks, Chillicothe
- Mound City, Chillicothe
- High Bank Works, Chillicothe
- Hopewell Mound Group, Chillicothe
- Seip Earthworks, Bainbridge
- Fort Ancient, Oregonia

European settlers recognized the economic opportunity on the land that the Wyandot – and other Tribes – inhabited. Through political negotiations and violence, all Native people were systematically removed from Ohio. Not all Ohio Tribes were removed as orderly as the Wyandot. Some, like the Miami of Indiana, were corralled at gunpoint, Wingo said – and couldn't take anything with them.

Stories of forced removal are often left out in conversations about Native Americans in Ohio, replaced instead with the history of the earthworks. Through an exhaustive study of Ohio's educational curriculums, Wingo found that schools prioritize the ancient stories of the earthworks rather than the more recent horrors of forced removal.

“The (earthworks) narrative,” Wingo said, “is comfortable. It reinforces the idea that Ohio was vacant land, ripe for settlement.”

Along with the loss of land, Native Tribes also lost many of their oral traditions about the earthworks. That is likely because the vast majority of Indigenous people died within a year of contact with Europeans, according to Low.

“How well would any community survive,” Low asked, “when 95% die within a year?”

Archaeologists like Lepper have worked for decades to fill that knowledge gap by excavating the earth and proposing theories about the uses of the structures.

Lepper surmises – as many Natives know for certain – that the earthworks were sacred sites.

“I think these places are pilgrimage centers,” Lepper said. “This was an almost continent-spanning religious movement.”

Contemporary Native communities recognize this tradition and treat the earthworks as hallowed land. To many, the sites represent hope, community, cooperation and resilience.

Most descendants of Native groups who were forcefully removed have not returned to Ohio, but many Indigenous people do live in the state. Although most are not members of one of Ohio's federally recognized removed Tribes, these individuals see the value of the earthworks for the broader Native community.

In Cincinnati, Urban Native Collective (UNC) is a community group dedicated to supporting local Native individuals. Briana Mazzolini-Blanchard, the organization's Executive Director and a member of the Tugong Clan of CHamoru people who are native to Guam, has dedicated her work to education, advocacy and support for Natives in the Cincinnati area.

“Ohio's earthworks are reminders of Indigenous resilience over the past 2,000 years,” she said. “They are important to all Native nations.”

Her colleagues at UNC explain the importance of the earthworks to their own identities as Native Americans. Homer Shadowheart, an Anishinaabe/Susquehanna descendent who grew up in Kentucky and is UNC's Office Manager, believes that the earthworks point to a larger spirit of connection.



Members of Anishinaabeg Nations, including Ohio State associate professor John Low (second from left) joined at the Great Circle Earthworks during the Mounds and Memory Gathering 2024.

PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER DAWSON

“You realize how much a part of something bigger you are,” Shadowheart said, “and how infinite that connection is.”

Cate Donahue, UNC’s Community Outreach Manager and an enrolled member of the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, grew up in Cincinnati but recognizes the importance of the earthworks for Natives who live far outside Ohio.

“Sacred sites echo each other,” she said. “They bring about an appreciation for the natural world, and they make you feel connected to the landscape of Ohio. It makes me think of how I’m connected to my ancestors in that way.”

Chief Glenna J. Wallace, Chief of the Eastern Shawnee Tribe in Oklahoma, surveyed the Ohio crowd in front of her.

Hundreds of people stood shoulder-to-shoulder to celebrate the opening of Great Council State Park in Xenia, near Dayton. The new park is situated on the site of Old Chillicothe, a Shawnee village that survived multiple attacks by white settlers until the early 19th century when the Shawnee were removed.

“Ohio is our homeland,” she said, her voice projecting over the crowd. “And we appreciate all the work being done here to educate people about us.”



Guests climb the Earthworks in Newark during the Mounds and Memory Gathering 2024.

“But remember,” she paused for emphasis: “Nothing about us, without us.”

That sentiment echoes across time, space and tribal affiliation. The spirit of cooperation is at the heart of the story of the earthworks.

“One of my favorite aspects of the earthworks is how egalitarian the Hopewell were,” said Low. “The earthworks were all built by consensus.”

Low is referring to the belief, as evidenced by the kinds of houses the Hopewell built and the kinds of food they ate, that ceremonial leaders lived the same kind of life as every other community member.

While some individuals may have directed the work of building the earthworks, the Hopewell did not have kings or rulers who lived separate from the community. Instead, those leaders resumed their regular life with the other community members



PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER DAWSON

when they left the earthworks.

“The earthworks were probably built on a single person’s or a small group’s vision,” Low explained. “They had to be able to communicate that vision to other people. They had to have charisma to get other people excited about it. That was maybe a level of cooperation we don’t see anymore.”

The earthworks stand as a testament to

## The Ohio Country Podcast

In the years just before Ohio became a state in 1803, there was cooperation between new settlers and the Indigenous people of Ohio – an exchange of ideas and technology.

But over time, the new settlers wanted more land. Conflict and death followed. Ohio Tribes were pushed onto reservations further and further north in the state. Then, the U.S. government imposed forced removals.

While those Indigenous people have died, their stories have not.

The Ohio Country, a podcast series from WYSO funded by Ohio Humanities, shares the perspectives of Native men and women whose ancestors were forced from their Ohio homeland. In the series, journalists Neenah Ellis and Chris Welter also interview teachers, artists, scholars, historians and others about the lands above the Ohio River known as The Ohio Country.



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Listen at [WYSO.org](https://www.wyso.org) or your favorite place for podcasts.

# The Future of the Past

By Stacey Halfmoon



So often when we hear about Native American Tribes, it is in the past tense – where they lived, how they lived, what type of homes they built, what animals they hunted and what tools they used.

We were taught in school that they were a great people, vast in numbers, living in balance with the natural world. They had an inherent wisdom and special abilities – almost supernatural ones – to walk quietly, to talk to animals, to hear the voices of the spirits.

Certainly, those stories are much less horrific than the stories of Native people from more recent history. These recent stories are equally romanticized in mainstream culture. They characterize the demise of the Indians as inevitable, a people who reached “the end of the trail.”

Native people know a different version.

Long before this land was the United States, it was the homeland of Native people. The land we today call Ohio is pockmarked with earthworks, mounds and thousands of other sites used by Native people for at least 12,000 years.

After contact with white settlers, Native people know there was a time of negotiations and treaty-making between Native Nations and European Nations vying to claim lands in North America. It was a time of foreign diseases like smallpox, which devastated Indian populations and upset vibrant

Native cultures and traditions. Tribal Nations were under constant pressure to sell or give up their lands, to move out of the way of settlers, to be allies of one Nation or another in the fight for or against the creation of the United States. They remained under constant pressure to adopt new religions, to become educated and to give up ancestral lands. If they tried to defend their lands or their people, they were villainized.

As Native Tribes were pushed to reservations or far-flung regions of the country, their homelands were swarmed by non-Native people. Members of Tribal Nations could no longer access their villages, cemeteries, ceremonial centers, sacred sites and earthworks. Generational knowledge of places and traditions was pushed aside while many Tribal people faced existential threats of disease, relocation and the destruction of their culture.

But Tribal Nations did survive. And their stories never ceased amidst that turmoil.

Ohio is a place that richly reflects that dichotomous history: ancient architectural mounds and modern cities, natural beauty and a history of death, stunning earthworks built by Indigenous communities and a golf course that sits on top of them.

Today we look toward the future, not the past. We know the history; we acknowledge it. Native people live every day with the vestiges of that past: disease, poverty, high suicide rates. This is no coincidence. It is a direct result of what Native people have endured.

Still, we always look to the future. Tribal Nations have made unbelievable strides as sovereign Nations with economic development plans, community health programs, higher education programs and cultural preservation programs.

My grandparents were both sent to Indian boarding schools in the early 20th century, and yet I, two generations behind, was able to grow up at home, near them, where I started an Indian Club at my high school and attended college. My daughter was born the year after the Native

American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA, 1990) was signed into law by President George Bush. Her generation has seen the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), the most comprehensive international declaration on Indigenous people's rights.

Challenges remain for Native people, of course, but the world is changing. We must hold and nurture the vision we see for Tribal Nations now and in the future. It is a long game. Just like our ancestors had to make decisions that would affect future generations, we do the same today.

That is how our ancestors survived, how we all survive: by remembering the future generations who will be here. By understanding that we do not live only for ourselves. We live to create a world that will be inherited by our grandchildren's grandchildren.

The ancestral earthworks in Ohio and other locations are gifts from our ancestors. We stand in awe of their designs, their symbols, their beauty. These sites deserve to be protected and shared, because they tell the stories of magnificent cultures and Native people that have lived in North America for millennia. They were families, communities, artisans, intellectuals, ceremonial leaders, mothers, daughters, fathers, sons, grandparents.

They were human, and they were our relatives. They still are.

As we consider the future of these sites, we have visions that involve Indigenous education, Indigenous ceremony, Indigenous research, national and global partnerships. Just like an ancient earthen mound where the ceremonial house on top rests on the ashes of the former ceremonial houses, the future of these sites rests on the ashes of what they once were.

It is a launching pad for Native people to be recognized, for Indigenous ideas and systems to once again flourish, for cultural revitalization and renewal to be the rule rather than the exception.

the spirit of cooperation among the people that built them, and they offer inspiration for a more cooperative future that includes American Indian Tribes in decisions about how to proceed in honoring and sharing their past and present.

Halfmoon, Low and Mazzolini-Blanchard envision a future where Indigenous people are invited into decision-making processes – one in which they are acknowledged for their deep understanding of the land and the environment.

“The earthworks have so much to teach us,” Mazzolini-Blanchard said. “The future is Indigenous. And it should be that way because Indigenous people are keepers of the world's biodiversity.”

Halfmoon – who is now back in Oklahoma and just earned her master of laws in Indigenous Peoples Law from Oklahoma University – said the earthworks stand as pillars of what can be produced through cooperative labor.

“We carry the past with us into the future,” Halfmoon said.

“That is why the places of our ancestors are respected and revered. What is possible when everyone, including Tribes, work together?” ●

Narrative medicine is a discipline of healthcare that helps patients, families and professionals tell and listen to stories of illness – offering opportunities to help them unearth and process their feelings. Ohio’s Nicole Robinson is just one of three full-time narrative medicine specialists in the country – and the only one at a children’s hospital.

*Story by Alex Stuckey  
Photos by Adam Cairns*



# *Powerful* Prescription



Nicole Robinson, a narrative medicine specialist at Akron Children's Hospital, works with Liam Whitworth, a patient with cancer, while his parents relax in his room.

A skinny, 6-year-old boy in Super Mario pajamas sits on his heels with his back to the hospital room door, wisps of white blonde hair clinging to his mostly bald head.

He kneads a clump of red clay between his palms, occasionally dropping a hand in his mother's lap so she can pick the red bits out from under his brittle fingernails.

Across from him sits Nicole Robinson, a woman with a booming laugh and inviting smile. She is warm and kind, and when she is with you, she is there – inside the moment – fully.

“Do you know how you want to start your story?” Nicole asks.

Liam Whitworth stares into space.



Nicole, on couch, elicits a smile from Liam Whitworth as Registered Nurse Mariah Higley, at right, cares for him. At right: She transcribes on her laptop as Liam shares a story.

“Yes,” he says in a soft, high-pitched whisper. “King Rhabdo is my enemy.”

Liam was diagnosed with a rare cancer called Rhabdomyosarcoma at age 4. He soon started referring to the cancer as “King Rhabdo,” a chunky, maleficent ruler poking out through his ear canal. The hospital’s soldiers, which come from potions – Liam’s name for chemotherapy – fought valiantly against King Rhabdo and at one point even defeated the evil leader. But King Rhabdo came back with a vengeance, growing larger and larger inside the little boy’s head.

Liam’s prognosis is no longer positive.

So, Liam’s doctor called in the hospital’s general, Nicole.

Nicole is a trained poet and narrative medicine specialist who helps patients with serious illnesses, their families and their caregivers process their emotions through the written word.

It’s a discipline known as narrative medicine, and it uses works of literature to help patients, families and professionals tell and listen to stories of illness. It offers patients and those in their circles – parents, siblings, doctors, nurses and others – opportunities to unearth and understand their feelings and, sometimes, come to terms with their realities.

Nicole is one of just three full-time narrative medicine specialists in the country – and the only one at a children’s hospital.



Though narrative medicine has been around for decades, it's been slow to catch on. But when Sarah Friebert, founder and director of the Haslinger Pediatric Palliative Care Division at Akron Children's Hospital, found Nicole, who was teaching creative writing in hospitals across the region, she quickly understood the difference a program like this could make. Now, it's the only known children's hospital in the country doing this work with a specialist dedicated full time to the practice.

It makes sense at Akron Children's, Friebert says. They already had seen success with an expressive therapy program that offers art, music and dance.

"There's way more to healing than just Western medicine," Friebert says. "We really realized there's more to life – to a child's life and to a family's life – than can be provided through a prescription pad."

During narrative medicine sessions, Nicole gauges how patients and families are feeling that day.

Do they want to read a piece of poetry or literature? She runs through her internal rolodex, selecting a work that reflects their emotions.

Do they want to write, either about the work they read or about something different? She gives them time to do that.

*Editor's note: Each individual's diagnosis, prognosis and circumstance as described in this story were accurate as of its reporting.*

“Narrative medicine provides a container to discuss things that seem too hard to discuss,” Nicole says.

The program has yielded incredible results, with patients and families saying Nicole’s sessions offer an outlet for their emotions – a reprieve from the constant doctor visits and clinical speak that lead to so much stress.

The benefits of narrative medicine aren’t only anecdotal, though. Studies have shown that converting emotions into words can help patients change the way they think about trauma and their illness, thereby reducing the stress associated with it. Today is Liam’s first session. And instead of reading a work of literature to a 6-year-old, Nicole is focused on getting his story about King Rhabdo down on paper.

It will serve as a keepsake for his parents.

Liam begins speaking, and Nicole types furiously as the story tumbles from the little boy’s lips.

“King Rhabdo was very chunky,” Liam whispers. “Because he was super big.”

**T**he walls of Nicole’s corner of an office are lined with books – some bursting at the seams with poetry, others with prose.

Little Buddha statues sit at random along the shelves, nestled alongside rocks and seashells she’s collected on her numerous backpacking trips.

An intricately designed wooden box holds dozens of lovingly placed funeral pamphlets

memorializing her patients who have died; those that didn’t fit are taped to a nearby wall. They remind her every day why she’s here.

Until about 15 years ago, Nicole was on a more traditional poet’s path. She earned a master’s degree in creative writing, taught in Kent State University’s English department and became the assistant director of the university’s Wick Poetry Center. As part of her work at the center, she started leading creative writing workshops at shelters, prisons and hospitals – and that’s when Akron Children’s reached out.

By 2013, she was teaching creative writing workshops for the hospital’s palliative care team while still working at Kent State.

She loved it.

“I started writing when I was young, and it provided a lot of guidance,” Nicole says. “It wasn’t just a place I escaped to, but a place I discovered a lot inside of. So, the idea of sharing poetry and literature with others in a non-traditional setting really felt right.”

She didn’t know this work had a name: narrative medicine.

Discussions about narrative medicine began in the 1980s, when a Harvard University professor, Dr. Arthur Kleinman, suggested that understanding a patient’s story of their chronic illness was important to treating it. Over the years, that definition has expanded as research has increased. Now, it is considered a practice to directly improve the lives of not only patients and their families, but also their caretaking teams, too.



After her favorite pen was discontinued, Nicole switched to Blackwing pencils for all of her writing.

While narrative medicine remains an emerging field, the impact researchers have recorded, including these examples, is compelling:

- It can be used to treat depression in cancer patients, according to a study published in *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy* in 2013.
- It can reduce compassion fatigue and burnout in health care workers, according to a study published in *Association of American Medical Colleges* in 2016.
- It can reduce pain for chronic-pain patients, according to a study published in *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* in 2021.
- It can help brain cancer patients with resilience and discovery of meaning, according to a study published in *Journal of Clinical Neuroscience* in 2021.
- It can have “potentially revolutionary benefits” for enhancing patient care, lowering clinician burnout and improving team dynamics, according to a study published in *The Permanente Journal* in 2024.

So, when Sarah Friebert offered Nicole the chance to launch this program at Akron Children’s in 2019, she jumped at

the opportunity to set the bar for what narrative medicine can do in a children’s hospital.

**T**he United States, France, the United Kingdom

*And all of the colonizer demon children countries*

*They have wiped away the blood rain*

*As they sign their soaked papers*

*They have smiles on their faces as we beg for scraps.*

Amirah Oden, 18, twirls a long braid around her index finger, her eyes dancing across the computer screen as she continues to read her poem, “How Much Blood Before the Devil Drowns,” about being Black in America.

She’s been angry – angry at the world for co-opting her culture, and for allowing Black and brown folks to die in the streets and at the hands of police.

And if there’s one thing she’s learned from working with Nicole for five years, it’s to put all that anger on paper.



Top: Nicole meticulously charts her schedule on her office whiteboard. Bottom left: She sources poems and other writing from favorite books and online. Bottom right: Nicole often grows close with patients, who she memorializes in various ways.

“It’s good that you were getting it out on the page, right?” Nicole says on a Tuesday morning before Amirah goes to school. “Instead of just carrying it around.”

Amirah’s sister, Naiima, has seizures and relies on a ventilator to breathe. She comes to Akron Children’s for care – and that’s when Amirah met Nicole.

Amirah and Nicole banter back and forth like best friends. They talk about Amirah’s exes, her goth era, that time she made a purple tombstone in a hospital art class. They talk about racist teachers and Amirah’s dreams of medical school.

The two are organizing her collection of poems to submit for publication.

Nicole considers working with the siblings of patients to be just as important as working with the patients themselves.

When a child is in and out of the hospital with a serious illness, most of the attention is given to them. But the illness causes a blast radius, and secondary trauma can take root in other children living in the house.

Amirah jokes about the struggles she’s faced since her sister got sick – the depression, the bouts of mania, the anxiety.

But her poems ripple with the pain it has caused.

“I think you were reading ‘Catherine and I’ poems to me before,” Nicole says. “Because remember we talked about persona poems?”

By writing through a persona, “Catherine,” Amirah has been able to explore her feelings through someone else’s lens. She’s been writing poems in the voice of Catherine for the past year – a tool of craft introduced by Nicole.

“Yea, let’s get ‘Tragic Teenager,’ ” Amirah laughs, digging up that collection.

She begins to read.

*How much love does it take to earn you*

*In your entirety, I mean?*

*I asked the great giver if I might be a captain of Russia*

*But like to her my love lasting seems to appear in the art and work I’m destined to share.*

Nicole’s hiking shoes blaze a path through the halls of Akron Children’s, walking purposefully from one consultation to the next.

Floor six.

Floor three.

Floor eight.

Back to floor three.

She rarely stops moving, preferring to grab a smoothie at lunch – “Lunch on the go!” She is constantly glancing down at her list of consultations for the day, so she never forgets a name or diagnosis.

There are so many children she wants to see – so many children who could use her help.



Nicole leads a conversation with staff, including Lily Heath, center, and Kaley Stika. At right: During the staff discussion, she invites team members to consider the words of “A Litany for Survival,” a poem by Audre Lorde.

Doctors joke that they need roller skates to keep up with her.

Gwen Richner, a clinical research coordinator at the hospital, flags Nicole down in the hall, rushing to keep pace as she delivers an enrollment update for the ongoing narrative medicine trial in the pediatric critical care unit. The trial, in its second phase, was funded through a \$20,000 grant from Ohio Humanities. They’re inviting people to join, but some are hesitant.

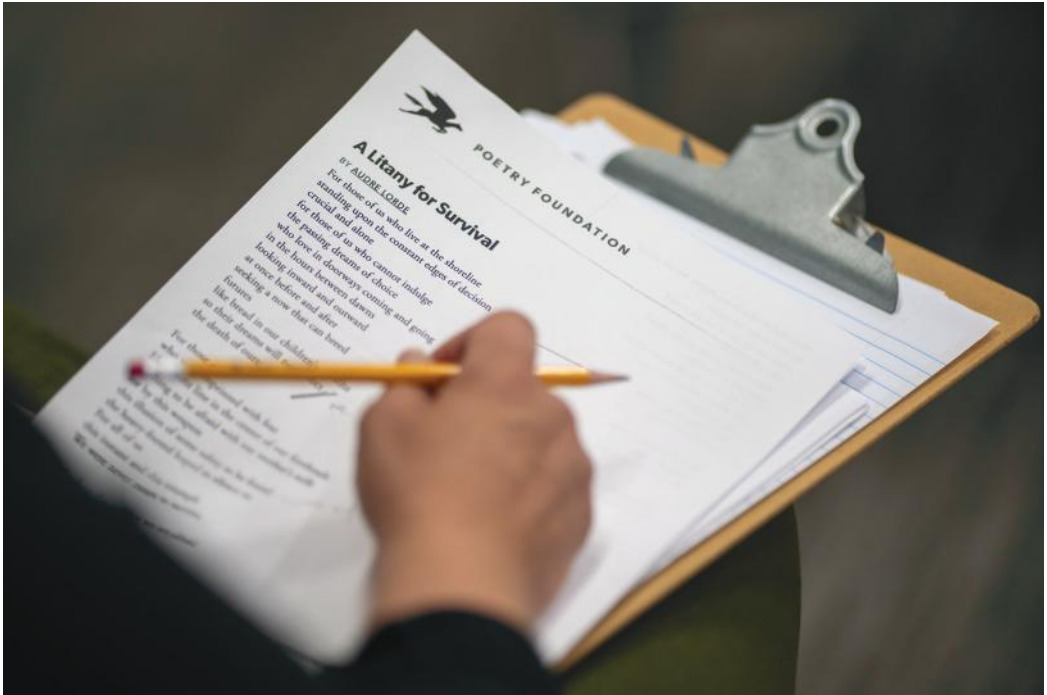
“Three no’s,” Gwen says. “One maybe.”

“Thanks for the update!” Nicole shouts, rounding the corner as Gwen falls back.

One of the program’s difficulties is that its importance cannot necessarily be proven through the usual hospital metrics, such as length of stay, return admissions and mortality. Narrative medicine is a little more squishy than that. Studies are needed to show that it works and that it should be funded in all hospitals across the U.S.

Because leadership at Akron Children’s already sees value in programs like narrative medicine that aren’t just measured in dollar signs, they consider it part of their mission to increase the evidence for these therapies.

“We have an obligation to tell the story ... so people can see that it isn’t just a nice thing to have, it’s actually necessary,” says Friebert, the palliative care director. “There



are real impacts on healing, on coping, on length of stay, on all the metrics that hospitals do care about.”

The palliative care division at the hospital has conducted several trials in this space, including a study to determine if caregivers in the pediatric critical care unit would even participate in a narrative medicine program. That study, published in 2022, found that they were likely to engage. The second phase of the study, in which people are currently enrolling, will look at outcomes. But hospital researchers are still trying to determine the best metrics to use when measuring for success and necessity.

“We’re trying to look a little bit closer at, Does this change the anxiety level?” says

Daniel Grossoehme, a research scientist at Akron Children’s. “Does it let them construct some sort of meaning out of this experience?”

Nicole and her colleagues, including Friebert and Grossoehme, just wrapped up a study in the burn unit, and evidence already suggests that narrative medicine seems to reduce patient anxiety and help them find meaning in what has happened to them, Grossoehme said.

Ultimately, the goal is to get an outside funder to finance a multi-site, multi-year trial.

Grossoehme is hopeful.



Nicole meets with Akron Children's research scientist Daniel Grosssoehme, who is exploring the impacts of narrative medicine on patients. At right: Nicole has little downtime in her days, and even that is typically spent searching books or the internet for writing appropriate for her next patient.

“We think we’ve got the preliminary data to really justify and support an application.”

**S**tylish sneakers squeak on the linoleum floor as a teenager wanders the halls of the hospital’s oncology unit.

The teen is antsy – here for treatment once again and trapped under the fluorescent lights on a beautiful spring day.

This young person’s cancer journey has been long and arduous. Working with Nicole has helped the teen process the experience.

“Do you want to read today?” Nicole asks, after exchanging hugs.

“No,” the teen says. “I want to walk.”

Nicole’s days are often like this. Sometimes, kids want to talk, to read poetry and prose and write some of their own.

Sometimes, they just need to get out of bed.

Nicole tries to give them agency over their sessions. They have so little control over everything else.

After walking the hospital halls for 20 minutes, the teen wants to write out feelings about being back in the hospital but doesn’t want the world to see it.

So, Nicole takes the teen to her office. She



pulls out dissolvable paper, and the teen writes.

Afterwards, they dunk the words in water and watch them disappear.

One day, the teen wants to write a memoir and share thoughts with everyone who will listen.

Today is not that day.

And that's OK.

**N**icole's fingers dance across the books lining her shelves, searching for the right piece for her next patient.

Her fingers wrap around a book, and she places it in her "Read More Poems" tote bag.

She turns to her computer, searching for a poem that just popped to the forefront of her mind.

She likes to go into her patient consultations with options. It's always a guessing game as to what will hit home on any given day.

"I like to meet them where they are," Nicole says, grabbing the printouts and stuffing them into her overflowing tote.

Most of Nicole's time is spent visiting patients and families in the hospital –

meeting them in rooms that have become homes, full of stuffed animals, suitcases and hand-stitched blankets. Some, especially those on the transplant floor, have been here for months. Nicole is sometimes the only person they speak to who isn't a doctor, nurse or relative.

But a few times a week, Nicole visits kids from palliative care who were in the hospital but have since been sent home. Some home visits are down the street. Others are over an hour's drive each way.

Nicole grabs the keys to her white SUV, plugging an address into her phone.

"Thirty minutes," she says. "Let's get going."

**M**y stylus is a magic wand

*It lets me do whatever, whenever*

*It takes me places I never thought I could go to*

*It makes things I never thought I could make*

*Art, music, anything you can think of*

*My stylus is a magic wand*

Emmie Wanzer's iPad stylus is tucked inside her cheek, tapping away at the screen positioned in front of her face. The seventh-grader contracted a rare neurological condition as a toddler that paralyzed her from the neck down. She relies on a ventilator to breathe.

So, when Nicole asked Emmie to write a poem about her favorite object, there was no hesitation.

She's had this stylus since she was 4. It

helps her write stories, read books, surf the web, even play music.

It brings her solace, just like the stuffed unicorns and gnomes on her shelves and the purple blow-up alien hiding behind her bedroom door.

"You should hold onto that!" Nicole says when Emmie finishes reading her poem. "I love that the stylus being a magic wand is bookending it, and then we're taken on a journey of where the stylus can take the speaker."

Narrative medicine helped Emmie open up. Most of her writing has to do with belonging.

During a trip to the hospital last year, a spotless giraffe was born at the Tennessee Zoo, and another was spotted in the wild just weeks later. Emmie saw the story on TV. The words started flowing.

*I'm different from the others*

*I'm my own type of person*

*I don't have spots.*

*All the others wear beautiful, luscious coats of spots, different shapes, all different types of styles*

*I want to be like others*

*I want to fit in with my friends.*

**S**unshine streams through the windows of Nicole's favorite stairwell – the kind of sunshine specific to a northern Ohio spring, where natives can tell that the wind is biting despite clear skies.



Nicole visits with Wendy McNair and Wendy's daughter, Maddie Williams, at their home in Kent. Nicole helps Maddie, who has cerebral palsy and chronic lung issues, write stories, and she also provides writing prompts to support McNair in her caregiving journey.

Nicole lets the sun hit her face as the tears flow.

She's only human. And sometimes, the job gets to her.

The child she just saw needs a bone marrow transplant. Will Nicole eventually be taping her memorial pamphlet to the wall?

The woman who rarely stops moving just needs a second.

Nicole deals with heavy topics, heavy emotions, heavy stories every day, whether it's in the pediatric ICU or the oncology unit or the inpatient psychiatry center.

She's found ways to cope that don't require

her to detach from her patients or her emotions.

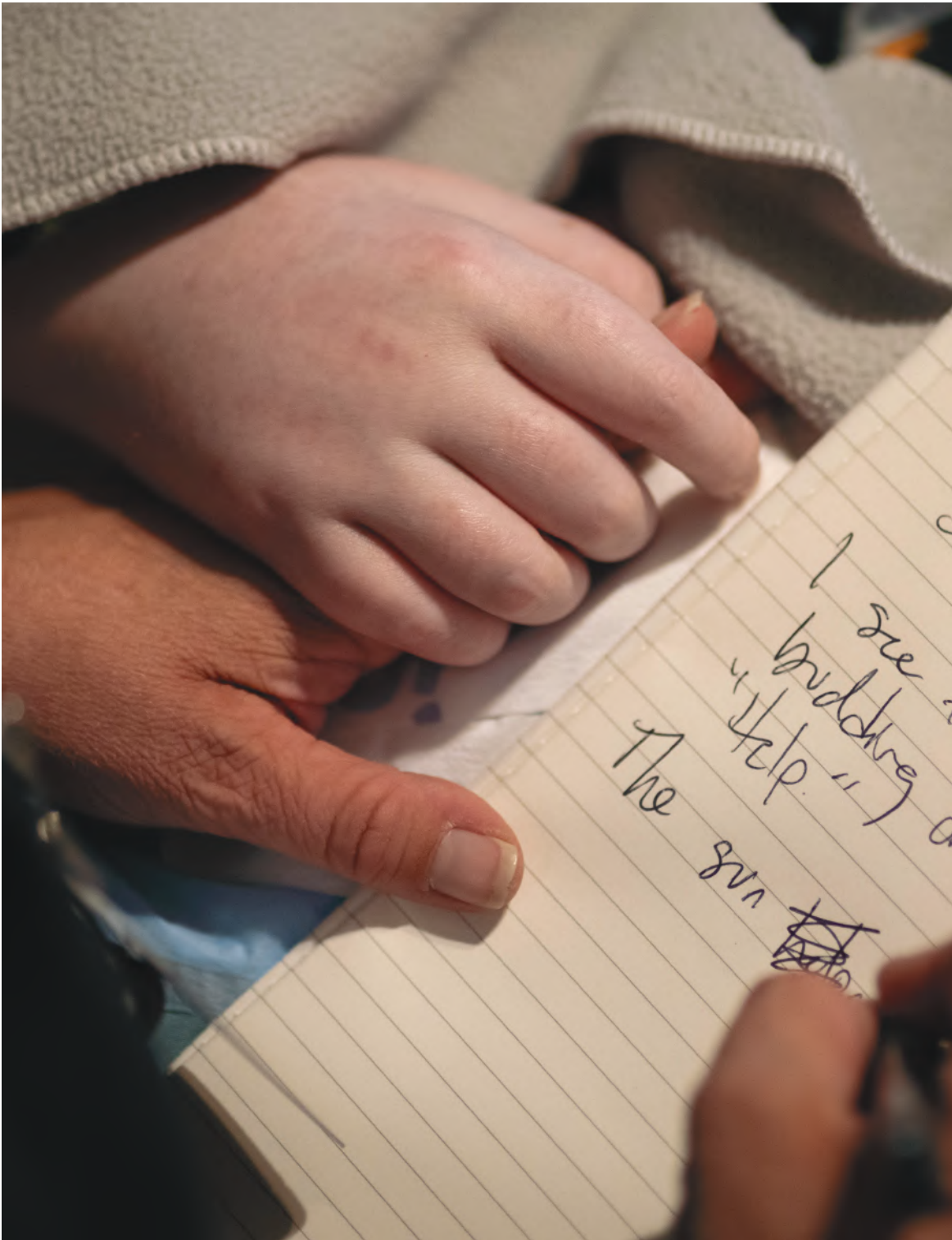
There's the gym in the mornings.

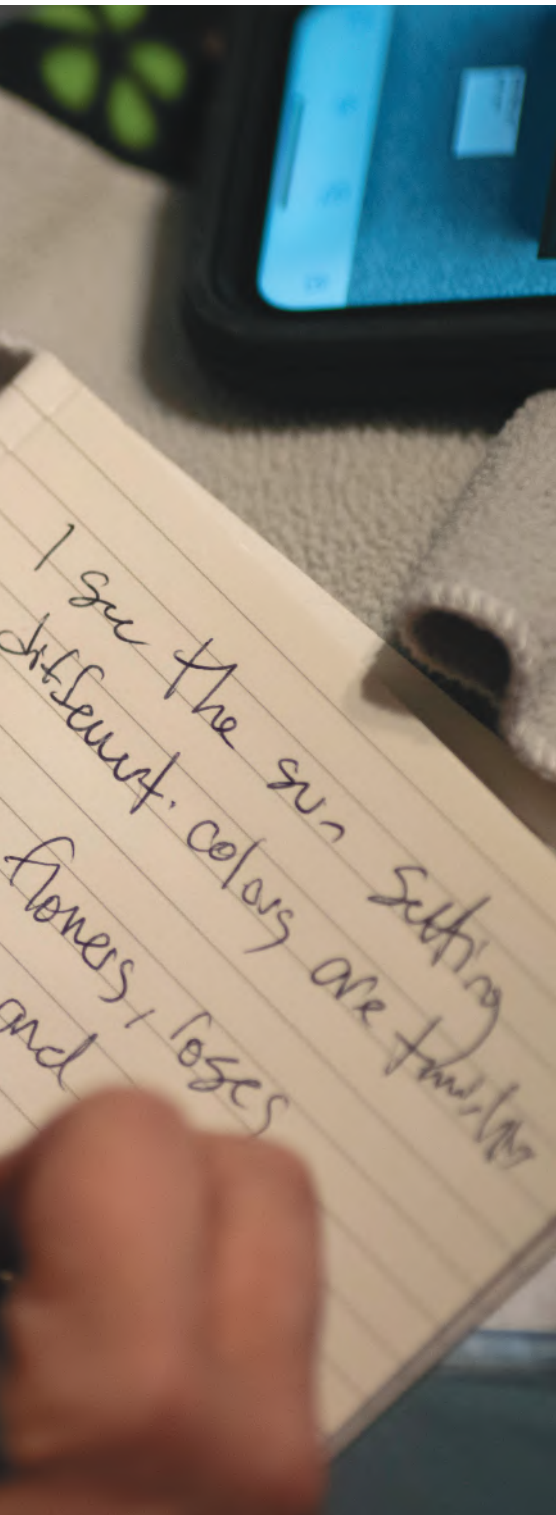
There's the camper where she goes birding with her wife on the weekends.

There's the specially created playlist she listens to on the way home.

And there's this stairwell, an always-welcome escape where she can collect her thoughts between sessions.

She does her best not to shy away from her emotions. You can find hope, she says, even in the dark.





“Even in the midst of a lot of pain,” she says, “there are moments of beauty.”

She’s learned so much about life from the people she works with.

Once, as she finished a session, a patient looked at her with a request.

“Feel the rain for me,” the patient said.

Every day since, Nicole has parked on the uncovered roof of the parking garage.

She plans to feel every bit of weather for that kid and all the others who can’t.

**T**he dark, cold ocean water rushes over my feet as I stand in the sand

*I can hear the wind and feel the rain*

*I can hear thunder moving as I climb in the trees*

*The water is getting high as I climb higher in the trees*

Maddie Williams, 19, loves the ocean. She paints seascape after seascape in her bedroom – some depicting clear, cloudless days and others stormy nights.

Maddie has cerebral palsy and chronic lung issues.

She can hold her paintbrush and make broad brush strokes of blues and yellows and purples. But when it comes to writing, she needs a little extra help.

Maddie Williams gently cradles the hand of Nicole as Nicole transcribes a story that Maddie shares.

So on a Wednesday afternoon, Nicole sits hunched over Maddie's bed, scribbling in a notebook as Maddie dictates a poem about a painting she made the day before.

"Do you want me to type it up for you, so that when you do hang these (paintings), you can hang it beside it?" Nicole asks.

Maddie nods.

Nicole's presence has been a Godsend, both for Maddie and her mom, Wendy McNair. It gives Wendy a chance to step away, to take a break from the tubes and the medications and the worry.

The writing, too, has helped Wendy cope. When she's stressed, she texts Nicole for a writing prompt.

For Maddie, Nicole's presence allows space to express her feelings to someone other than her mother.

"She helps me get everything off my chest that I need to," Maddie says.

Before leaving, Nicole checks in with Maddie.

"Do you have some stuff you've been going through that you want to write about?" Nicole asks.

"More in private," Maddie whispers.

Nicole starts to transcribe.

**T**hat you were born  
and you will die.

*That you will sometimes love enough  
and sometimes not.*

*That you will lie  
if only to yourself.*

*That you will get tired.*

Two members of the hospital's palliative care team read "The Facts of Life," a poem from *Sorry For Your Troubles* by Pádraig Ó Tuama, while relaxing beneath a tree. They ping-pong back and forth between stanzas as the chilly spring wind carries their voices across the courtyard.

Nicole hand selected this poem for the nearly 20 palliative care staff members participating in this month's narrative medicine workshop to read and reflect on.

The poem talks about the highs and lows of life, the staff determines – how it's not all dark and twisty but it's also not all rainbows and kittens.

For one team member, it brings up thoughts of her biological parents, whom she never met.

For another, it stirs up emotions of how rough the day has been, from start to finish.

For yet another, it makes her think of Liam.

Liam, who lies in a hospital bed, dreaming up visions of King Rhabdo.

Liam, who only ever wanted a little sister – and now that his mom is pregnant, may not live to meet her.



Nicole laughs with Liam Whitworth as they work on his ongoing story about King Rhabdo—his nickname for his Rhabdomyosarcoma, a form of cancer.

Liam, whose family is trying to decide whether to send the chemo soldiers in one more time or let the little boy enjoy as much life as he can.

Liam's parents are somberly planning his funeral. But they're also giddily preparing for him to throw the first pitch at an Akron RubberDucks minor league baseball game.

Life is full of highs and lows.

Thankfully for so very many, Nicole Robinson is here to help them feel their way through both.

*That you must accept change  
before you die  
but you will die anyway.*

*So you might as well live  
and you might as well love.  
You might as well love.  
You might as well love. ●*

That you were born  
and you will die.

That you will sometimes love enough  
and sometimes not.

That you will lie  
if only to yourself.

That you will get tired.

That you will learn most from the situations  
you did not choose.

That there will be some things that move you  
more than you can say.

That you will live  
that you must be loved.



# The *Facts of Life*

*Written by Pádraig Ó Tuama*

That you will avoid questions most urgently in need of your attention.

That you began as the fusion of a sperm and an egg of two people who once were strangers and may well still be.

That life isn't fair.

That life is sometimes good and sometimes even better than good.

That life is often not so good.

That life is real  
and if you can survive it, well,  
survive it well  
with love  
and art  
and meaning given  
where meaning's scarce.

That you will learn to live with regret.  
That you will learn to live with respect.

That the structures that constrict you  
may not be permanently constricting.

That you will probably be okay.

That you must accept change  
before you die  
but you will die anyway.

So you might as well live  
and you might as well love.  
You might as well love.  
You might as well love.

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SE

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# E N

**What does it mean to be human?  
Five Ohioans reflect on being  
seen based on their lived  
experiences.**



# THE CORNER

By Rose Daniels

**Rose Daniels is a clinical case manager at Sanctuary Night, a center in Central Ohio for women at risk of sexual exploitation. Staffed by trafficking survivors, counselors and other mental and physical health professionals, Sanctuary Night provides a place to rest, eat, connect and get desired resources.**

When I was 10, my grandma looked at me and said, “You’re going to be selling yourself on the corner, just like your mom.”

I didn’t know what she meant, but I didn’t ask questions. She was an alcoholic and prone to saying cruel things when she drank.

I didn’t know that one day, not so far into the future, she’d be right.

I’m the product of prostitution. My mother was an addict and sex worker who left me at the hospital when she had me. My grandparents raised me, and, for a time, I thought they were my biological parents.

One day, at age 6, I called to my grandmother in the kitchen. She was talking with my aunt and ignoring my pleas.

“Mom! Mom! Mom!” I said.

“That’s not your mom,” my aunt finally responded. “That’s your grandma.”

I looked at my grandma, confused.

“It’s true,” she said.

It crushed me. The world I knew – and everything in it – felt like a lie.

My biological mother was in and out of my life, an unsteady presence that left me reeling.

By the time I was 12, I was regularly helping myself to a joint and a beer. I liked the way they made me feel, and I liked the older kids I smoked and drank with. They saw me as a young, pretty face, and their attention, for a time, filled the gaping hole left by my turbulent childhood.

At age 13, I met a 25-year-old man, and I called him my boyfriend. That boyfriend quickly made me a victim of sex trafficking.

“She’s really pretty,” I heard him say one night over the phone. “You can have your way with her.”

Introduced to the lifestyle by our biological mother, my older sister was an addict and a sex worker, too. So I followed her lead. I dropped out of school, abused drug after drug and fulfilled my grandma’s prophecy. It wasn’t long until I was homeless, living on the streets of Columbus and selling myself to support my addiction. In truth, I believed I would die out there, and I was OK with it. It felt like fate.

But then my sister got clean. She got off the streets and eventually founded a nonprofit. Each week, she’d head to the same corner where she once stood to sell her body, and she would

distribute hygiene bags, food and clothing to women like her – women like me.

One day, as I stood on that corner with a sunken face and track marks on my arms, I heard a familiar voice.

“Excuse me, ma’am?” the voice said. “Would you like a packed lunch?”

I looked up to see my sister, and I fell into her arms. It had been two years since we last talked.

Embarrassed and lost, I caught a felony for drug possession and finally made the decision to plead in CATCH Court, a specialized docket and program for victims of sex trafficking that has served as a model for other courts around the country. With compassion, they sent me to treatment, and over the next few years, I heaved, toiled and fought my way out of addiction. I began to see myself anew. I graduated from CATCH Court in 2019 and got my GED soon after.

Knowing there were women like me still standing on that corner eventually inspired me to get my Chemical Dependency Counselor Assistant (CDCA) certification. I now work as a clinical case manager at a center for women at risk of sexual exploitation.

I look at them, and I see myself, my sister, my mother. I see where they are now, and I see the potential their future holds, even when they can’t.

My grandma foresaw my future too, but it was a partial view.

I see it for myself now, and I can see that it looks bright.



# PHOENIX RISING

By Debra J. Gipson

**Cleveland native Debra J. Gipson is a podcaster, filmmaker and military veteran who spent 10 years in the Army and served in the Iraq War. She earned a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College, a J.D. from the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, a master's degree from Carnegie Mellon University and a master of laws degree from Hofstra University. She participates in the Veterans' Voices project at Literary Cleveland, a free writing program for veterans presented in partnership with the VA Northeast Ohio Healthcare System.**

The air is thick and stifling in the Carolina heat. We have been here since zero dark o'clock, waiting.

Finally, the Sgt. in charge signals, and we gather like moths to flame.

"In today's mock war exercise, you are going to choose a team, devise a plan and execute it," he says. "There will be a reward should you successfully defend your location against our team. Any questions?"

My hand is among the first to be raised, but I am not selected.

"Any questions or comments?" he asks again.

I raise my hand once more, and he nods his consent for me to speak.

“Everyone the captain chose is white and male,” I say. “There is nothing wrong with his selections, but the lack of physical diversity may imply a lack of operational or situational diversity.”

The Capt.’s nostrils flare.

“Shut up,” he commands.

The team explains the plan. Again, the Sgt. in charge asks if anyone has any questions or comments, and again, I raise my hand. The Capt. ignores me, but the Sgt. says he wants to hear what I have to say.

“The problem with your plan is that you focused all available resources here, here and here,” I said, pointing to the field map. “So, you left this area vulnerable to attack without a backup plan in case the original plan fails.”

The Capt. points his finger in my direction.

“Shut up!” he repeats. “The plan is well thought out and will keep assets and personnel safe.”

The mock war games begin. As predicted, our unit is attacked in the exact position I predicted we would be attacked. In fact, everyone is, hypothetically speaking, dead.

The Capt. blames not himself, but me.

“If she just would have kept her damn mouth shut, then my plan would have been successful,” he bellowed.

Then, he announced his intention to have me court-martialed for insubordination.

At the precise moment those words roll off his lips and float along the muggy Carolina air, I decide that the next time I am rendered invisible, my paycheck will cushion the disrespect, and I will be a commissioned officer referred to as “Ma’am.”

A year later, I will raise my right hand and swear to protect and defend my country against all enemies both foreign and domestic. I am not invisible. I have arisen, phoenix-like, from the ashes, reborn as 2nd Lt. Debra J. Gipson.



# THE GIFT

By Erik Lehmann

**Erik Lehmann spent seven weeks at Seabury Barn, a youth shelter in Stony Brook, New York, as a teen. A friend's parents took him in and put him through Cornell University, where he earned his bachelor's degree. He founded the Cornell Coalition for the Homeless and traveled with the National Coalition for the Homeless as part of their Speakers' Bureau. He is now a social entrepreneur and business consultant living in Delaware, Ohio.**

Mikey was following me around while talking, just as he had been doing since I moved into Seabury Barn.

At 17, I was the oldest kid at Seabury, a shelter for youth. At 11, Mikey was among the youngest, and he looked like the Mikey from the Life cereal commercials.

Walking and talking was our ritual. Every day, I returned from school, and Mikey just talked and talked until dinnertime. And every day, I wore a light blue, white and gray baja hoodie that Mikey really, really liked.

Before Seabury, being invisible had become a survival mechanism for me. Perhaps ironically, then, living at a shelter didn't make me feel invisible: It made me feel more seen than I had been in the years leading up to my stay there. I relished my big brother role.

One day, as Mikey was talking, I realized I had never asked him why he was living at Seabury Barn.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

Mikey actually stopped talking. He peeled off his shirt and showed me what appeared to be a constellation of cigarette burns on his back. He was, for the first time since I had known him, silent.

“My mom’s boyfriend can’t seem to find a better place to put out his cigarettes,” he finally said. “So until he does, I live here.”

I could not unsee his burns. That day changed my life forever.

Eventually, once I told people I was staying in a shelter, my best friend’s parents, the Masons, took me in – but not before Mikey told me when his birthday was.

Seabury Barn was only three blocks away from the Masons, so I went back to visit frequently.

As Mikey’s birthday approached, I was unsure how to recognize it. I knew from experience that birthdays were somewhat challenging days, especially within the shelter system.

At the Mason home, I took on the task of doing all of the laundry that had amassed from my days at Seabury Barn. (It acquired quite the unique aroma!) I transferred a load of clothing – including the light blue, white and gray baja hoodie – from the washer into the dryer.

It entered the dryer Erik-sized and exited the dryer Mikey-sized.

I fell to my knees in tears, knowing that the universe had helped decide what I got to give to Mikey to recognize his birthday. I found some wrapping paper and taped it all up.

On the day of Mikey’s birthday, I was so excited that I raced to Seabury Barn. When I arrived, Mikey was standing in the front doorway. It appeared I was the only one he entrusted with the knowledge about his birthday.

He opened his present, and I will never forget the smile on his face.

“Peek-a-boo Mikey,” I said, grinning. “I see you!”

And see him I did.

That experience has shaped my world lens profoundly. I spend much of my time asking others the question I asked Mikey: “Why are you here?” I feel like I can see people fully regardless of their title or place in the world.

Making myself invisible, however, is a survival skill that has persisted. I must actively work against that instinct.

Thirty-three years after handing Mikey his gift, I turned 50. I bought myself a dark blue, gray and black baja hoodie. On that day, I looked in the mirror and actually saw myself – and decided to let myself be seen.



# TAPESTRY OF WISDOM

By Jeremy Rosario

**Jeremy Rosario is a Columbus-based artist and creative director who passionately serves as a volunteer medical translator at the Grace Clinic of Delaware. Jeremy – who painted this issue’s cover – loves finding ways to uplift and inspire the world through art.**

*The fleas do not get into the rug.*

A patient from Mexico said this to me as he was waiting to be seen by a doctor at the Grace Clinic of Delaware. The clinic, which is powered by volunteers, offers free medical care to patients who otherwise wouldn’t have access. I’ve been a medical translator there for 10 years.

I hadn’t heard this phrase before, so I asked the man to elaborate.

“We’re the fleas – the bugs,” he told me in Spanish. “And the rug is people in higher society.”

I was struck by his vulnerability. With just a few words, he very poignantly expressed the feeling of isolation, of otherness, he was experiencing as an immigrant.

The man seemed to be asking: Do I have value here?

I have heard many forms of this question from patients at Grace Clinic over the years. And through our conversations, I hoped they would see that they do, of course, have value.

I'm an immigrant, too. Raised in Puerto Rico by a single mother, I grew up with little money and a deep love for art.

At the age of 8, I asked a local shop run by artists if I could work for them after school. I swept their floors, cleaned their brushes and did other odd jobs for \$5 a week – just enough to buy bread and milk to help feed my sisters.

I studied painting in school and eventually earned a scholarship to the Columbus College of Art & Design. The summer before I moved to Columbus, I worked hard to put \$250 together for my plane ticket. When I arrived, I didn't speak English, and I felt lost – much like the patient from Mexico. Over time, however, I found my place. And through my conversations at Grace Clinic, which go far beyond physical health, I hope to help others begin to find theirs.

One way I do this is with a simple question: If today is the last day we see each other, what words of advice would you give me?

This is a question typically asked of thought leaders, CEOs and those we deem successful.

But we often fail to ask what's in the heart of the people who have suffered the most. Their insights, acquired through hardships I often find unimaginable, are always wise and, many times, surprisingly positive.

"Happiness can be found even in the darkest of times," one patient told me.

"Don't be afraid to start things today that you've been saving for the future," another said.

I believe asking them to share their advice communicates the importance of their perspective.

Back in 2021, as the pandemic began to wane, I wrote down a collection of these messages and painted oil portraits of the patients, with their permission, for an exhibit in downtown Delaware.

In the middle of the gallery, I put two chairs. Between them, I wrote: Share your most treasured advice.

In a matter of weeks, the floor was carpeted with sticky notes filled with inspiring words and thoughts on life. Visitors would sit, read and rarely leave with dry eyes.

The man from Mexico's words rung in my head.

He, and others like him, had inspired a rug of wisdom, a beautiful tapestry of advice for a meaningful life.



## USING IT

By Brooke Largent

**Brooke Largent is a student at Olmsted Falls High School who plays softball, basketball and soccer and was a member of the school's 2024 Division I State Championship basketball team.**

The whole world is going mute, and my brain is on fire.

My tics take over me. I can't suppress them at this point. My entire body is jerking back and forth, my head is throwing back, and my feet are thrashing into the ground.

"Take deep breaths," someone tells me. "Calm down."

I can barely breathe, let alone voluntarily move. I am paralyzed.

My school peers are confused. I am taken to a quiet, secluded area to let the tics carry out. It helps having people there to make sure I don't hurt myself or others, but there is nothing else they can do. It's not like they can go inside my head and fix what is wrong with me.

I am 16 years old. I am an honor-roll student,

a two-sport varsity athlete, a basketball state champion, a sister, a daughter, a granddaughter and a friend. I love Taylor Swift, hanging out with my friends and getting Chipotle with my teammates after games.

I also have Tourette's Syndrome.

Tourette's Syndrome is a neurological condition characterized by involuntary movements and vocalizations known as tics. The exact cause is unknown. There is no cure.

From the subtle nuances of daily interactions to the broader landscape of personal identity, Tourette's has profoundly shaped my journey, prompting both challenges and opportunities for growth.

*Why?*

It's the question that I ask myself every day.

Why was I cursed with this illness that plagues me daily? Why do millions of people have it, yet we know very little about it? Why is there barely anything out there that can help me?

People experience their tics differently. I struggle with severe physical tics and minor vocal tics. Thankfully, dramatic attacks aren't regular. They normally happen when I am particularly stressed out. Smaller tics are much more common. I wouldn't wish the feelings that I experience on a daily basis upon anybody. I feel helpless and weak. I want the tics to stop, yet there's nothing I can do other than experience them.

Tourette's is exhausting. Not just physically, but mentally.

When you experience full-body tics, your body is basically doing a workout. I often need to

rest for a couple of hours after major attacks.

Then there's tic suppression. I am blessed with the ability to be able to control and almost "hold in" my tics for short periods of time. Although this is useful during formal events or quiet places, it is exhausting on my body and mind. Holding them for maybe 10 minutes makes me feel as though I ran a marathon.

When I am having a low-tic day, I think about how amazing it is that I have this disorder and can still carry out a pretty amazing life. When I am having a high-tic day, the amount of embarrassment that I feel towards myself and the others around me for having to experience it is almost unbearable.

My friends and loved ones are super supportive. What I appreciate most about them is that they don't make a big deal about my tics. They don't even acknowledge them. The worst thing you could do while talking to someone with Tourette's is point out their tics. Explaining it to people is humiliating. I know it shouldn't be, but unless you experience this disease or something similar, it's impossible to understand what it is we go through.

There is no way of beating this. Medications barely help me.

The only thing that I can do, then, is use it.

I can use my experience to help educate others. I can use my mental strength to power everything from my academics to my athletics. And I can use empathy to help others with differences feel seen.

My main goal in life is to make others who experience Tourette's feel as though they are not alone.



Ohio native Eli Hiller, seated, was conceived through an anonymous Filipino sperm donor. He explores his roots in the documentary *Becoming Us*.

A man in profile, wearing glasses and a dark jacket, is looking towards a brick wall. The scene is dimly lit, with a warm glow from the wall. In the foreground, there are several out-of-focus light spots in blue, orange, and yellow, suggesting a film set or a stage.

# THE FILM FELLOWS

*By Taylor Starek*

The Ohio Humanities Film Fellowship at the Wex amplifies nonfiction storytellers through a collaboration with the Wexner Center for the Arts at The Ohio State University.

Now in its second year, the partnership supports up to five filmmakers each year working on humanities-informed documentary films with a connection to Ohio.

Here, meet two of our 2024-2025 film fellows – and the projects they’re creating.

PHOTOS COURTESY FILM DIRECTORS



Eli Hiller, second from left, discovered and connected with relatives while making the documentary *Becoming Us*.

# EXPLORING IDENTITY

Eli Hiller, who grew up in Athens, Ohio, was conceived through an anonymous Filipino sperm donor.

Feeling a pull to explore his identity and connect with his roots, he moved to the Philippines after college and eventually took an Ancestry DNA test to find his father. It led, however, to another rich discovery: He has four half siblings.

In his forthcoming documentary, *Becoming Us*, Hiller explores the many ways in which he and his siblings were shaped by their racial identities and parentage and what it means for them as a newfound family today.

“It’s a love letter to my siblings as I go through this process in getting to know them,” he said.

Hiller, who has documented political protests across the Midwest for Getty Images and was recently selected for a Kartemquin Films’ Diverse Voices in Docs fellowship, is hoping to screen the film in late 2025.

### **How was the process of finding your siblings and father?**

I had found a cousin on his side of the family. I read to her the inquiry letter my biological father wrote when he was donating at age 19. He wrote that he was a drummer in a band and modeling at the time. He was going to med school. She said, “Oh, that sounds like my uncle.” She called her father, who called him. Then my father called me the next day. I eventually found all four of my siblings. And I’m just trying to understand what questions they had growing up. What does it mean now for all of us to connect? What does this family structure look like? What does it mean to have newfound siblings and a father?

### **How are you telling the story?**

The film is a mixture of cinema verité scenes that are playing out naturally with some planned scenes. Normally, I don’t do much poking and prodding with my films, but since I’m both a participant and a filmmaker, I’m bringing certain things out just by being present. I’m interviewing my siblings, their mothers, my biological father, my mother. I’m pulling personal archives from my mother and siblings from when they were kids. I’m doing some research surrounding donor-conceived people. A lot of donor clinics are privately managed, and that data isn’t available to the public. It’s less of a traditional documentary. This is much more reflective, personal and intimate. And since I’m a character and filmmaker, I’m digging deep into my own narrative.

### **Why is this story important?**

It’s rare that we get documentary films about

the Asian-American experience in the Midwest. I also don’t think there’s ever been a donor-conceived film from the perspective of the filmmaker. Reclaiming our own narrative in that journey is important. It’s also very much a film for Gen Z, a coming-of-age film about identity as Asian Americans post-pandemic.

### **What do you hope the audience takes from the film?**

My ideal audience is Filipino Americans and donor-conceived people, but most people can relate to the values and themes of the film. It’s about family. I want people to know that it’s OK to feel different and that found family is important. It’s easy to feel alone at times, but it’s important to know there are other people going through something similar, and there are communities who will support you. It’s about the messiness of family. I want people to be able to hug their brother, sister, father, mother and say, “Hey, we’re still figuring out our relationship, but I appreciate and value you.”

### **What conversations do you hope the film provokes?**

Many Filipino Americans, through colonialism and immigrating to the U.S., feel they’ve lost that connection to their identity because of not knowing the language or not visiting the Philippines. They don’t feel Filipino enough. What does it look like for you to find your own identity, and at what point does it feel like you can be comfortable within that identity? I want Filipino-American audiences to have that conversation. Specifically, for the donor-conceived community: What are the implications of having an anonymous donor? How does that impact who you are? What needs to change in that industry?



“It’s a personal documentary, and it’s easy to get overwhelmed, because my whole life is the narrative.”



Filmmaker Benny Zelkowicz is using fine beach sand to create dream-like images in *Sacred Society*.

## RITUAL BEAUTY

What does it mean to care for the dead?

After the 2018 mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pa., Benny Zelkowicz, a Pittsburgh native, found himself drawn to the Chevra Kadisha, a Jewish burial society.

Zelkowicz, who was familiar with Tree of Life and profoundly affected by the shooting, was struck by the society's commitment to ritual in the wake of tragedy. The Chevra Kadisha ensures bodies are prepared for burial according to specific Jewish practices. Knowing the society is made up of volunteers, he decided to join. Soon, he began examining his own beliefs, as well as our culture's discomfort with death.

Zelkowicz – an animator who's worked on *The LEGO Movie* and *The Simpsons*, among many other films and TV shows – explores this theme and others in an upcoming short documentary titled *Sacred Society*.

The film will pair audio interviews with visuals made from sand animation, a technique Zelkowicz has used for other projects. It's an intricate and careful process, he said, making it a fitting representation of the Chevra Kadisha – and of the fragility of life.

"It all connects very much to the central explorations of what it means to live," he said, "and to choose to act with an intense consciousness of our very finiteness."

### **What story will this documentary tell?**

After the shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, there was an article about the Chevra Kadisha – that they came to the site and were helping to clean it. It prompted me to explore joining the Chevra Kadisha locally. There was something I was drawn to about the work of cleaning and preparing bodies for burial. I found it had a profound impact on the way I was thinking about things. I was starting to interrogate my own reasons for wanting to do this and how it was affecting me, so I started conducting interviews with the other people I had been working with – a group of volunteers. The imagery is sand animation of the actual rituals of preparing the bodies, which is of course something most people never see or encounter. I'm hoping the imagery showing the tenderness and intimate care these people are doing coupled with their explanations of why they're doing it will be an effective juxtaposition.

### **Can you describe the animation technique you're using?**

I have a lightbox underneath a camera that's pointing down, and I use a fine beach sand. When the sand is thick enough to block the light on the lightbox, you see black, and by varying the thickness of the sand or removing it entirely, you can get a full range of tonalities. I create a painting with the sand and photograph it, and I modify it a little bit and photograph it again. I do that multiple times for every second in the film. There's something very tactile about the image, something very dreamlike about it. There's something about the process that's very meditative. You have to control your breathing in order to make sure you're not disturbing the sand.



“ There was something I was drawn to about the work of cleaning and preparing bodies for burial. I found it had a profound impact on the way I was thinking about things. ”

### **What do you hope the audience takes from the film?**

I'd like people to think about what it means to actively choose to bring this awareness of death into one's everyday life. I'm hoping there will also be some thought on how we choose to remove ourselves from the reality of death and hand off those responsibilities to professionals to deal with. I'm hoping people will think about what it means, within whatever community they choose to identify themselves, to find ways of taking some of that responsibility back. Even if it's not the physicality of dealing with the body, but more how we choose to mark that transition from being present to being absent – and actually finding ways of personalizing that more and giving responsibility back to ourselves rather than having it behind closed doors. That communal involvement is something I'm hoping people will reflect on.

### **What conversations do you hope the film provokes?**

I expect there will be some element of surprise that people choose to do this – that there's a desire to actively engage and participate in this and that people choose to go and care for the dead. And also the notion of caring for the dead – what does that mean? One thing I explore in the film is my own navigation between my lack of belief in anything supernatural with my connection to these religious practices; there's an inherent contradiction there that I'm constantly navigating. But I'm hoping the idea of the value of ritual comes through, whether it's religious ritual or other forms we choose to create.

## BEHIND THE STORY

Meet the creatives behind this issue's cover story on narrative medicine



### ALEX STUCKEY

Alex Stuckey is a journalist who has won both the Pulitzer Prize and Livingston Award. An Ohio native, she has reported on stories across the nation – from the astounding brilliance of NASA scientists to the mishandling of sexual assault reports at colleges and universities. Her work has put two people in prison, helped overhaul broken policies and shed light on the human condition in myriad ways.

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### ADAM CAIRNS

Adam Cairns is an award-winning Ohio photojournalist who travels the globe covering sports, news and feature stories. A photographer for *The Columbus Dispatch*, his work has also appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Sports Illustrated*. He has been named best photographer in Ohio by the Ohio Society of Professional Journalists and the Ohio News Photographers Association.

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### JEREMY ROSARIO

Jeremy Rosario is an Ohio artist and creative director who created the cover art for this issue. Born in Puerto Rico, Jeremy studied art at the Columbus College of Art & Design and has shown his artwork in shows around the country. His cover piece was inspired by the idea of being seen and the impactful work of narrative medicine specialist Nicole Robinson and the children she helps.

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### WORK OF HEART

Jeremy Rosario's multimedia cover art, commissioned for this issue of Lumen, is a painting that incorporates pink and blue medical masks to represent medical heroes. In one part of the image, a stethoscope turns into a flower, which is nurtured by a tear. In another part, a hand on someone's back doubles as an angel's wing. Support is shown in multiple ways. And in several spots, lines connect people's eyes, as they are seeing—and being seen—by one another.

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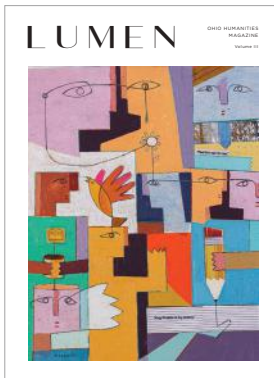
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# OHIO HUMANITIES

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*“There’s more to life – to a child’s  
life and to a family’s life – than  
can be provided through a  
prescription pad.”*

—Sarah Friebert, Akron Children’s Hospital

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