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Seniors to Seniors

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Creator(s)

Miriam Clasby, Margie Hollingsworth, Harriet Mill, Rusty Zeddis, Robert Convery, and Joan Dawson

SENIORS TO SENIORS



Artist: Kaitlin Thibeau

June 7, 2015

Louis T. Graves Memorial Public Library
18 Maine Street, Kennebunkport, Maine 04046

When Graves Library Director Mary-Lou Boucouvalas and I started talking in the spring of 2014 about putting together a memoir-writing program for the Library, I had already been toying with the idea of bringing seniors and high school students together to share stories. I have taught memoir for over a quarter century, with students ranging from middle-school boys to great-great grandparents, and I am always struck by how years melt away when telling one's life stories.

Youthful events are described as though they happened just yesterday, rather than decades ago. I've watched elderly women giggle like schoolgirls, recalling a first crush. One man in his 90s still harbored the sting of a childhood punishment, when he was made to sit over a dish of congealing, uneaten spinach, while his siblings got to go to the country fair. I thought hearing these kinds of stories would be a great way for young people to make a connection with their grandparents' generation that didn't require sitting around a table at Thanksgiving.

Initially, the idea started out as a practical one. I had also been working with the Portland Public Library to the same end. We wanted to encourage seniors to share and preserve their stories, but we needed to get over some hurdles. There was the possibility of vision or dexterity issues – not everyone is physically able or comfortable writing and/or working with a computer. And some seniors might be put off by the very idea of writing about themselves. It's hard to fathom in this tell-all age, but there was a time when people kept their personal business to themselves. Doing otherwise was considered bad taste, or worse, prideful.

Yet, we are all natural storytellers, so what, I thought, if we took away the stigma of writing, and let the seniors record their stories, orally. From there, someone could transcribe them. But who?

That's when the idea of Seniors to Seniors came about. Let high school students do the transcription and, at the same time, get to know a voice from another generation. Mary-Lou contacted Sara Young, an English teacher at Kennebunk High School, to see if she had any students who might be interested. She did. (We decided we didn't want to limit participation, and some underclassmen joined us, but we kept the Seniors to Seniors name, all the same.) While it took several months to get the program funded and launched, once it was, we were off and running.

After the seniors recorded their stories into a small cassette player (old-fashioned technology to some of the students who had never before seen such a contraption) supplied by the library, the tapes were distributed to student partners, who then transcribed their given story and formed it into an essay. The students were then asked to collaborate with their senior partner by offering a critique – pose questions, request further illumination, highlight parts that really spoke to them – which we discussed in workshops at the high school. The students then met with their partners to incorporate

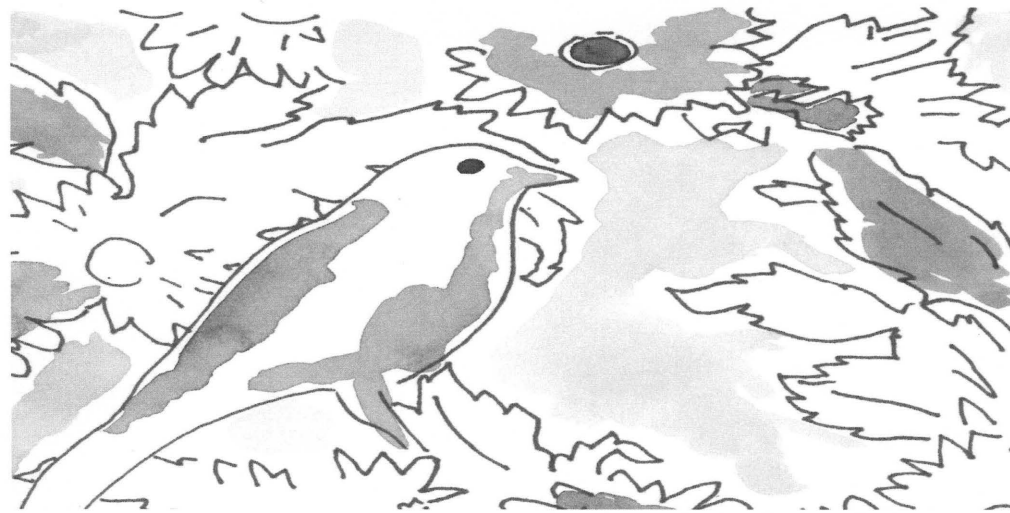
these amendments into a working document, going back and forth until a final draft could be completed.

The students and I met several times over the winter and spring of 2015 to discuss progress. They were lovely. Even though our work together was not for credit, they took it as seriously as though it were. They squeezed our meetings in between all their other numerous commitments and were focused when we met. Oral histories were gradually molded and crafted into personal essays that became sharper and clearer through the students' input. Even though it was another person's words from another time, the students grew to have an investment, a sense of ownership. A connection had been made.

We hope you'll enjoy reading and hearing these stories as much as we did working on them together. Mary-Lou, Sara and I are so grateful to the seniors who took the time to share their beautiful stories and the students who helped bring them to the page. We also want to thank Kaitlin Thibeau for her spot-on illustrations, the Southern Maine Library District for awarding us a Mini Grant to help fund this project and the communities of Kennebunk, Kennebunkport, and Arundel for their support. It really does sometimes take a village – or in this case, three.

Elizabeth Peavey
Portland, Maine

Elizabeth Peavey, who served as facilitator for Seniors to Seniors, is a Portland-based writer, performer and educator. Her award-winning one-woman show, My Mother's Clothes Are Not My Mother, has toured Maine since 2011 and recently debuted in New York City. She is the author of three books and has appeared in Down East magazine since 1993. She is a frequent guest lecturer and speaker around the state, including two Pasco Lectures at Graves Library.



Artist: Kaitlin Thibeau

CHEERIO

By Miriam Clasby as told to Kacie Nelson

Cheerio was the perfect canary for me as a five-year-old child. His brilliant yellow feathers brightened not only his own cage but also the whole cramped living room. The best time of all was in the early morning, as soon as the radio news program began with its lilting melody, "In A Country Garden." Cheerio would begin a zesty trill that lasted long after the music stopped. It was like liquid sunshine on a dark day. Then one morning I woke up to find that Cheerio had died during a cold March night. Brokenhearted, I slipped back into my bedroom, quietly sobbing.

In this same year, my family moved out of our home and into an apartment. There had been so many changes since I had started kindergarten at the Newhall School, and now I had a new school to get used to. At first, I tried to scoot home during recess, but I soon learned to enjoy my time there. Now that I was five, I found it was easy to get to know my new classmates at the Bright School, and I even had fun teaching Jimmy Hayes how to tie his shoelaces. But I still missed my home on Charles Street Avenue, roaming through the four downstairs rooms – kitchen, dining room, living room, bedroom, and a small toilet beyond the kitchen. The bathroom near the three upstairs bedrooms was roomy, just perfect for warm baths. I missed the back porch, a perfect place for the morning's baby naps. And I missed the walkway beside the house where I rode my tricycle between rows of flowers on either side with changing colors at different times of the year.

Living in an apartment was new to me. I could not really feel at home in these four small rooms – just a kitchen, living room, and two bedrooms. I was also uncomfortable knowing that there were three other families living around us. It seemed so strange to have to get hot water by heating it on the kitchen stove and strange to have a small old stove to warm the living room. Strangest of all was sharing a toilet in the cellar with our upstairs neighbor.

There was no way for me to sense the challenges facing my parents. After two years of marriage in 1929, I was their firstborn. This was also the first year of the Great Depression. Even as newlyweds, my parents invited my cousin Tommy Mogan, a motherless teenager, to live with them. My brother George, Jr. was born in 1931 and my brother David in 1933.

At first my father's work at a national insurance company seemed secure, especially after a Boston official suggested he resign his territory to take a Boston office position. But when he resigned, there was no such position. He was now without work, and without much hope of finding work in the area of Waltham, Massachusetts.

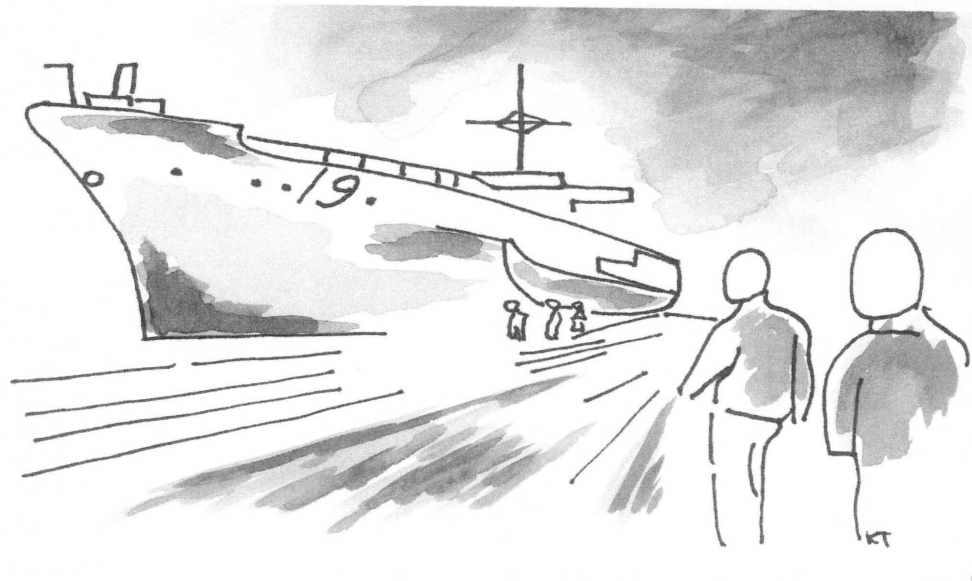
In desperation my parents developed a strategy, rent the house and take an apartment. Fortunately, another cousin, Kitty Dooley, owned property in a different section of the city, and she made a cold-water tenement available to them. They had not anticipated that the winter of '33 to '34 would be the coldest on record for the area, and that baby David would develop an extreme case of whooping cough. And they certainly didn't foresee that this apartment would be their home for three years – until a Federal Agent knocked at the door and proposed a new program for home owner's insurance and a new job at the Watertown arsenal for my father. This meant my family could return to our Charles Street Avenue home and start to turn our lives back around.

My mother had a special knack for amusing young children with snippets of poetry and songs, sometimes with verses such as, "Oh moon have you done something wrong in heaven that God has hidden your face? If you have I hope you'll soon be forgiven, and shine once again in your place." And she had songs that always had a smile, "Good Morning merry sunshine, how did you wake so soon?"

So on that morning I found Cheerio gone, she slipped quietly into the bedroom and sat silently beside me. Her sweater was soft, but her arms around me were strong and soothing. I don't recall all that she said to me. I know her basic message was, Cheerio is going to bird heaven. But it wasn't the specific words that stayed with me. She simply comforted me in my sadness and distress. Reassuring me that even bad things can have some good outcomes. At that moment, she was my Cheerio.

Miriam Clasby was born in 1929. She graduated from St. Mary's High School in Waltham, Massachusetts. Her favorite hobby is "Clasby Lore." She has prepared several booklets for 7 siblings, 17 nieces and nephews, and 35 great nieces and nephews. One of her favorite books is *In the Light of What We Know* by Zia Haider Rahman.

Kacie Nelson, Class of 2015, is the editor of *The Muse*, Kennebunk High School's literary arts magazine, after being an assistant editor last year. Kacie is working on a novel and will be attending college in Vermont; she plans to major in writing. We will be reading her work for years to come!



Artist: Kaitlin Thibeau

TOKYO HARBOR

By Margie Hollingsworth as told to Maia Mulcahy

Jack raced into the cramped room, his feet stumbling to avoid the mess of clothes strewn on the floor. Even though we were about to dock in Tokyo Harbor after a week on the U.S.S. *Hoover*, he still managed to lose his balance so easily. The children were much better at it.

I finished placing a blouse in the big suitcase lying on the bed and waited for him to catch his breath. After trying to gulp down some of the salty Japanese sea air, Jack began to speak.

"It's gone. All of their stuff is gone!" he exclaimed. I stared blankly at him, confused by the outburst. He tried to explain himself, yelling, "The Bakers! All of their belongings, gone. The ship with all of their things sank in that storm. Can you believe it? Just gone!"

The Bakers were a family we'd become friends with during our stay on the ship. Both Jack and Bart Baker had been sent by their respective companies to expand business in Japan for the next few years. World War II had just ended. Almost every other passenger was Japanese, so it was refreshing to have another American family that we could relate to.

I could feel my heart sink to the bottom of my stomach. "What do you mean?" I exclaimed, "How could they lose everything? That's not possible."

“The cargo ship carrying all of their belongings got caught in that huge storm we missed and had to be abandoned at sea,” Jack explained. “Aren’t we lucky, Margie? Remember how the cargo ship with our things was too full, and the Bakers’ things had to be put on another one?”

I had remembered, but it didn’t seem fair. Here we were, about to become strangers in a foreign country that automatically sneered at our nationality as a result of the war. And now the Bakers had lost everything. I stood up and made my way to the cabin door, my hand resting on the doorknob. In response to Jack’s puzzled expression, I quietly replied, “I need to see them.”

When I reached their room, there was no one there. I made my way to the main deck and immediately saw the Bakers surrounded by Japanese officials. Jan, Bart’s wife, was a mess. Her makeup was smudged, and it looked like she’d just finished crying. Bart’s face was a mixture of confusion and disbelief. He kept shaking his head and repeating the same words, “It’s a mistake. It’s a mistake.”

I felt my body moving backwards, away from the scene. I couldn’t do it. I didn’t know how to begin to comfort them. I had only known them for a week, but it felt like our families shared a connection. We were both looking ahead to a future we couldn’t predict in a place we’d never seen – excited yet scared. I couldn’t understand how I was able to be so lucky while they weren’t.

When our ship eventually docked, I began my new life in Japan. I never saw the Bakers again after that moment. They never made any contact with us, but when I look back on it I think it was for the best.

Margie Hollingsworth was born in 1926. She graduated from St. Timothy’s Boarding School in Baltimore, Maryland. Her favorite hobby is pastels. She loves reading Charles Dickens and fondly remembers having stories from *Swiss Family Robinson* (Stevenson) told to her by her dad.

Maia Mulcahy, Class of 2015, is the president of the Creative Writing Club at Kennebunk High School and has also been in ten theater productions over the course of her four years. She’s off to college in Florida where no doubt she will continue to add to her list of accomplishments.



Artist: Kaitlin Thibeau

GIRL

By Harriet Mill as told to Sue-Cai Seavey

We got Girl back in the early 1940s when one day she followed my brother home, which is how we got our dog before that, Brownie.

Girl was a smaller dog, and mostly my brother's pet. But we all loved and cared for her deeply as a true member of the family. This all happened in Asheville, North Carolina, when I was about 6 or 7 years old. My father was in the Navy and had gone to the Philippines, so it was just me, my mother, my brother Tommy, my grandmother, who was living with us, and our dog, Girl.

We lived in the city, and we had a Victory garden in which we planted beans and tomatoes, and other crops. Every spring the garden had to be plowed. There was an old man from out of town with a wagon and a horse who came down our street and would plow for people. Many households had Victory gardens back then to help supplement food rationing and to support the war effort.

One night Girl didn't come home like she usually did. We called and called for her, but she didn't come. We were at a loss to think what had happened to her. She wore a collar. If she'd been run over, surely someone would have called and identified her to let us know. So we were all hoping Girl was around somewhere and would eventually come home. I couldn't think where she would've gone, unless she had moved on and followed another boy home as she had once my brother. The same thing had happened to Brownie. That's how things were. But I knew she loved us, and was happy living with us, so it was a little sad to ponder this.

One day we were all out on the front porch, when we heard a clop, clop, clop: the sound of the plowman's wagon coming down the road, his horse pulling it. And there, sitting up beside him on the seat, was a brown dog, a dog that looked startlingly similar to Girl. My mother stood up and called her, "Here Girl." The dog jumped up and looked back at us, but the man whistled and the dog sat back down. The man laughed and laughed and laughed.

That sort of gave us hope that Girl was still alive, but unfortunately she would not be living with us again. We knew she was in good hands though. I believe to this day that the dog with the man was indeed our dog Girl. We missed her sorely, but living with that man in the country opposed to our city life was probably better for her. That's what I reasoned. My mother never went after her, and we never had another dog.

Harriet Mill was born in 1936. She graduated from St. Genevieve of the Pines High School in Asheville, North Carolina. Her favorite hobbies include from singing, reading and needlepoint/knitting. Her favorite book (currently) is *The Care and Management of Lies* by Jacqueline Winspear.

Sue-Cai Seavey, Class of 2016, is a relative newcomer to the writing clubs at Kennebunk High School, but her involvement in *The Muse* and the Seniors to Seniors project this year has been a great way for Maia and Kacie to pass the literary torch to her so to speak. In no time, she will be heading to college as well.



Artist: Kaitlin Thibeau

RAVAGES OF WAR
By Rusty Zeddis as told to Ashlyn Moran

At the end of the 1930s, I was in high school and the Germans were raging war in Europe. Some of us were doing our bit by joining the Red Cross to help those driven out of their homes. We were supplied with yarn and directions, and we'd bring back mittens and socks – anything easily done in a day or two. It's amazing what we can do in a short amount of time given the thought and incentive.

It was an awful time for families. A retired teacher in my town had taken in a boy and girl in my class, Tony and Bella, after they had lost their families. The British education system is ahead of ours, so Bella and Tony were two to three years younger than the other kids in their grade. They also dressed differently. Bella's mode of dress was close enough to fit in with the other girls here, but still different. Tony stood out. He wore shorts and knee socks, which was really different from all the other boys in long pants. Boatloads of children were coming in convoys from Britain to be taken into American homes, either because they had been displaced or their families chose to send them out of harm's way. Some were sent north to Scotland to stay with relatives or friends. One of my

pals said his mom removed his name from the boat ramps, for some of those boats were being bombed, killing all the children on them. Bella and Tony were lucky to make it to our town.

One of my friends told me that one morning in London, after spending the night in a bomb shelter, he returned to his house. When he ran up the stairs and opened the door, he found nothing beyond it. The house behind it had been completely leveled by a bomb. Another friend told me of his journey from Austria to New York. He and his brother left for school one day with their backpacks as usual, but they were never to return. Their family had planned for weeks how to escape and not attract attention. They walked from Austria to Spain. Through the escape networks, they made it all the way to New York. There, they were able to get an education and become successful.

I worked with a Jewish woman, who had tales of abuse and of her sterilization. Her brother had managed to get to America before she did. She and her dad were to follow. They came via Switzerland with a lot of help from that country. By the time they got here, her brother had been recruited by the O.S.S. Another woman I knew came from Austria. Her grandfather was in charge of the Lipizzaner horses in Vienna. When the Russians came through, the boy hid his mother in the boot chest so she wouldn't be raped. My Polish neighbor in New York City still bore tattoos from the camps. We had no idea the horrors they went through.

Today's news brings similar stories of horror and inhumanity. Will we never learn?

Anne (Rusty) Zeddis was born in 1924. She graduated high school in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Her favorite hobbies are reading and knitting. A favorite book is *Little Anne of Canada* by Madeline Brandeis.

Ashlyn Moran, Class of 2017, is a voracious reader and prolific writer. The youngest of our group, Ashlyn is just beginning to explore the writing clubs at Kennebunk High School. With two more years in front of her, she will likely be involved in both *The Muse* and the Creative Writing Club!



Artist: Kaitlin Thibeau

MEETING THE KU KLUX KLAN
By Robert Convery as told to Maia Mulcahy

I watch my father step out of the bedroom, dressed head to toe in his Navy uniform. He lightly touches the 45 semi-automatic pistol that is strapped in his holster as he gets ready to report to his duty station. Navy personnel have to be on every street corner during the protest. He kisses my mother and then me on the forehead as he walks out the front door to our apartment. My mother quickly says something to him about staying safe. My confusion about what's going on makes me want to ask Mother to explain, but I can tell by her worried expression that now is not the time.

Over the past few days, I've seen a blur of different grownups walking in and out of the front door to speak with my mother and father. I've been told to go to my room while they talk, but I can still make out words like "KKK" and "protests." I'm only four or five years old and am not sure what those words mean or what they mean for mother and father, but I've heard in one conversation that my father is being sent out to "control the masses."

After ten minutes, mother turns off all the lights and tells me to get back behind the couch. I wait there for what feels like forever, the sounds of our heavy breathing filling the empty space. After a while, I hear a commotion coming from

outside. The shade to the window is down, further piquing my curiosity. Before I can help it, I rush to the window and pull the shade away.

There's white, everywhere. White gowns, white masks, white crosses. I don't know what's going on, but I can sense it's wrong. Large signs with words I don't understand shake up and down. I hear loud whoops and hollers from the whiteness, some exclamations even reaching up to me. Many of the masked people hold crosses high above their heads. Pure dread fills my throat as a throng of people marches past my window. I hold my breath as I see them walking by, afraid they will notice me. A sheet of paleness completely lines the street.

"Get away from that window!" Mother hisses. I quickly move my hand from the shade and retreat to the farthest edge of the apartment. I have to feel around for the couch in the dark, but I slide myself next to Mother and sit down. Fear spins in my stomach like a top, gaining speed as I think about Father. Questions about why he is gone and if the big masses of people are hurting him dart across my mind like bullets.

After about a half hour, my mother turns the lights back on. I look around the apartment. Everything seems unchanged, like nothing has happened. Everything is unaltered except for me.

Robert Convery was born in 1937. He graduated from high school in Everett, Massachusetts. His favorite hobby is American History. Bob loves reading books by W.E.B. Griffin.

Maia Mulcahy, Class of 2015, is the president of the Creative Writing Club at Kennebunk High School and has also been in ten theater productions over the course of her four years. She's off to college in Florida where no doubt she will continue to add to her list of accomplishments.



Artist: Kaitlin Thibeau

THE ORANGE ROOF
By Joan Dawson as told to Kacie Nelson

I walked with my dad into a restaurant in the middle of the day, in the middle of the week. The year was 1950, and I was eight-years-old and in the third grade. It wasn't my birthday or even a holiday. My sisters weren't there, not even my mom. Just me and Dad. I had never been in this restaurant before. Actually, we didn't go out to eat very often. You see, there were seven of us at home, my mom, my dad, my four sisters and me. I was the middle child; not old enough to have special privileges, not young enough to be babied. I was sort of independent and spent each evening in my room that I shared with one of my sisters, after supper, playing teacher to my dolls. I felt grown up when I did. I wasn't criticized or compared to my sisters, and my dolls loved me.

But now, I was in Howard Johnson – the place with the orange roof. Just me and my Dad. The two of us walked into the restaurant with its sparkly lights

and music playing from a jukebox in the corner. A pretty lady with an aqua apron showed us to a booth and gave us large, paper menus. I was so excited.

We had a booth at home in our kitchen, but this was special. At home, all six of us slid into our booth, three on one side and three on the other; I was squished in the middle of one side. My youngest sister sat in her highchair at the end of the booth. But here I was, sitting all alone on one whole side of the booth, and my dad was sitting on the other side.

I could smell French fries and chicken sizzling, but that's not what I wanted. What I wanted was chocolate ice-cream cake with hot fudge. "Could I have that?" I asked. "That sounds great," My dad said, "I'll have that too." But it got better. I was smiling and smiling and smiling. All of a sudden Dad got up.

"I have to go to the bathroom, I'll be right back."

I looked around the room at all the people I'd never seen and realized that there were all kinds of people in the world that I'd never met. And, there are people in this world, who have never met me.

My Dad came back within a few minutes, carrying a doll. She had blonde hair, just like me, and a blue, glittery gown.

"This is for you," he said.

I hugged and kissed my new doll. I named her right then. She would be Marie, my middle name. Our ice-cream cake came, and we talked and we ate, just me and my dad. Then we left and got into the car with Marie.

I never knew why this special day happened, and I sure didn't ask. I knew that Dad and I had gone to our small hospital that morning and that the doctor had put some medicine on my chest, and that it felt kind of funny and numb. He asked me to look up at my dad and to hold on tight to my daddy's hand. Then he cut my skin and worked on the area. Then he put some black thread over the cut. It didn't hurt because it was numb, but I was really scared. I didn't look at it. I didn't look at anything, because my eyes were squeezed shut. Dad said they were taking a funny lump out of my chest and that I didn't want to have it there anyway. The doctor put a bandage over that cut, and my dad and I were soon under our Orange Roof eating that chocolate ice-cream cake. I had a special time that day with my Dad and with my beautiful Marie.

My Dad and Mom would soon know that I did not have Hodgkin's Disease. I had a benign tumor, one that wasn't sick. It was many years before I knew how scary that day was for my parents. For me, it was a day that I felt special. Soon

enough, however, I was back home, teaching Marie and the rest of my dolls in my room. I was the middle of five sisters again, sitting in the middle of our booth.

Joan Dawson was born in 1942. She graduated from Rose Hawthorne High School in Concord, Massachusetts. Her favorite hobbies include walking, reading, and quiet conversations with friends. *Gifts from the Sea* by Anne Morrow Lindberg is her favorite book.

Kacie Nelson, Class of 2015, is the editor of *The Muse*, Kennebunk High School's literary arts magazine, after being an assistant editor last year. Kacie is working on a novel and will be attending college in Vermont; she plans to major in writing. We will be reading her work for years to come!