

My life was forever changed when my oldest brother ran away from home at seventeen. While his initial attempt was unsuccessful, it irreversibly altered our family dynamic. At eleven years old, I was oblivious to the complexities of being a teen in today's world. I was too young to know why he left but old enough to feel that there was a significant shift in our family life. I hated that feeling.

I knew something was very wrong but I was too afraid to ask questions, terrified that it was far worse than my naive understanding. To cope, I would try to distract myself using art, creating whatever I could from Legos or designing comic book covers for a series about pirates. Seeing my struggle and my coping strategy, my grandma, being an artist herself, would bring me different projects to keep me busy. With her, I learned to embroider flowers and use acrylics to paint nature, where I felt most at home.

Our home life continued to be tumultuous, depending on the emotional state of not only my older brother but everyone who lived with him. To make matters worse, when I was beginning my junior year of high school my middle brother's mental health began to deteriorate as he too struggled with depression. He had recently moved to Chicago for college and was thousands of miles away from home. The toughest part was when he attempted suicide and my parents were forced to leave abruptly. They remained there for several weeks while I stayed home to continue attending school. Left on my own, I continued pursuing art on my own. I realized that I had to stay strong, for my family and myself. I had grown up seeing my parents continually worry about my siblings, and I was determined not to be another burden.

I recognized and understood that I would need to be self-sufficient and independent to take control of my responsibilities. The most difficult year of high school was in full swing and I was suddenly alone without my family. At times I found myself exhausted, balancing school, extracurriculars, and home duties. I did not let it stop me from working my hardest in school and staying positive. To stay on top of all my work and continue developing artistically, I built a routine that allowed me to spend equal time working and seeing my friends who were my support system. At home, I was also taking care of our three pets who needed more care and attention than I had realized.

While I have always been passionate about art, I never envisioned that it would ground me emotionally and keep me tethered to my family during this uncertain time. Joining Freestyle Academy, an interdisciplinary communications and arts school, initially showed me that my love of creating could be not only a hobby but an occupation. Being at a school surrounded by others who shared the same passion, I discovered who I was and channeled my artistic focus to help balance the chaos in my world, ultimately helping me forge a stronger familial tie, at the very moment I needed it most. For one Freestyle project, I designed a documentary book that explored my uncle's radio station, SomaFM, through interviews and research. I spent countless hours working in his studio and taking pictures learning about him not only as a relative but as a fellow artist. The experience allowed me to forge a much deeper and stronger connection with my uncle that continues to this day.

Through the experience of being on my own and simultaneously channeling my energy into art, I learned the value of being intrinsically motivated and reflective. My artistic and personal journey is a testament to the power of creativity as a source of not only beauty but also of healing.