**2nd Place Features**

***Aoife Osborne,* Schoil Mhuire Gan Smal, Blarney**

**Pressure, Perfectionism and Panic: The Positive Side**

In the midst of a panic attack, you cannot breathe. Your chest feels like it’s going to collapse on top of itself, you cannot focus on anything and you genuinely feel like you are having a heart attack. And the scariest part? Anxiety never completely goes away.

In a life that feels like a million years away, I was a strict control freak, a hardworking perfectionist and a straight-A swot with aspirations higher than Hermione Granger. Every second of my life was planned to the max, I thought I had myself prepared for any blow life dealt me. It turns out, I thought wrong – *very* wrong. I honestly don’t know where it all started to fall apart for me, but I think it started in sixth class of national school. The cause? Something that has been the root of most of our generation’s problems; bullying. Thankfully, the bullying never got particularly bad. What made it so terrible, was that my own best friends turned on me and made my life a living hell. What I had once considered a safety net, now became a trap with no escape. My one shining light was the promise of secondary school; a new environment, new friends, a nice, clean fresh start. Although the bullying stopped with the end of primary school, the bullies followed me to secondary school. In my head, there was still a chance everything could go wrong again. My answer to it was to work more, to try even harder. My thinking had been that by building myself a high podium, I could protect myself. What I didn’t realise, was that the higher you build yourself up, the further you have to fall.

Within two weeks of first year, I was diagnosed with labyrinthitis, a middle ear condition brought on by stress. The symptoms include, but are not limited to, dizziness, fainting, headaches and nausea. I was lucky if I made it through a full day of school, and I constantly pressured myself into working harder than I should have even attempted to. As I started my second year, fully armed with a new set friends, a new attitude and a labyrinthitis-free mind, I set off to prove that I was better. In hindsight, I can feel the pressure building up, remember odd bouts of tears and screams which I pushed abruptly aside. I did not want to consider the idea I might slowly be losing my grip again. In the end, I did not lose my grip slowly – it was snatched away from me in an instant, by anxiety and panic attacks.

It started with one or two missed classes a week. That became two or three days. Before I knew it, I was out of school for weeks at a time. My anxiety and panic attacks became so frequent that I rarely left the house. My social life became virtually non-existent – I stopped trusting my friends, becoming completely paranoid; after all, it was ex-friends who had gotten me into this situation, how was I to know that my new friends wouldn’t do the same? My parents took me to a counsellor on a weekly basis, but she was extremely dismissive, pushing down every thought or word I said, so I didn’t speak to her either. My life turned into the same routine of waking up a nervous wreck, going to school in the car, but becoming so terrified I couldn’t even open my seatbelt, and going home feeling totally drained. That was when the depression started to seep in.

My parents and I decided drastic change was needed: it was now February, and visiting my psychotherapist on a weekly basis for five months had not improved my panic attacks; if anything, they became worse. A different counsellor, and the help of someone who has gone on to become a good friend to me meant that within a month, I was attending every single class in a week. I still get panic attacks and bad days occasionally, but now I know how to deal with them. Not only that, I’ve learned to embrace them, and every other bad side of myself. My good friend, who I mentioned earlier, once told me that everything happens for a reason. So why did anxiety have to happen to me?

I guess the answer is that I had to learn a lot of things. It took an eight-month struggle to show me something I should have known all along; I cannot be the best every time. What’s more, I don’t *have* to be the best every time. I’m still a control freak, a geek, a perfectionist. To look me now, and me four years ago, you probably wouldn’t see a big difference from the outside. And yet, I am a completely different person. I had to learn the hard way what happens when I put too much pressure on myself, but most importantly, I had to learn that some people are not worth spending time with, so why would I? Some people do not care about me, so why should I care about them? Some people do not know the meaning of sorry, so why should I forgive them? At the end of those four years, I have lost some friends. I’ve put down a tough struggle which has driven me to hell, and some days I feel like I’m still crawling my way out. But at the end of it all, I have amazing friends. I’m stronger, better, happier and healthier than I have ever been. So would I change any of what I’ve been through? Never in a million years.

***Judges’ Citation***

*I recently interviewed author Evelyn O’Rourke from RTE whose book ‘Dear Ross’ is about her journey through chemotherapy while pregnant. She said, ‘I wrote this book to help me heal but if I could help just one person in the process, then it would be worth it’*

*Aoife Osborne’s raw account of dealing with stress as a teenager reminds me of that quote because we as the reader learn and benefit from the self exploration of the writer. Indeed, while some write to entertain, others write to inform and educate and this is the true meaning of this feature. Aoife presents a deep reflection on a lesson learned, an honest account of accepting the person you are and through that process, we as the reader benefit from her brave piece.*