

First Prize Writing: Middle School Division

*Light at the End of the Tunnel*

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Survivor Testimony: Leon Leyson

As humans, we do not link the ideas of pain and fear with those of discovery and hope. In fact, these ideas appear to be polar opposites. We do not think of connecting them. We do not believe that one can come from the other—that hope can come from fear or that discovery can come from pain. We are incredibly wrong.

Leon Leyson was only ten years old in 1939, when the Germans invaded Poland. After the invasion, he lived with his family in the Krakow ghetto in Poland. They did what they had to do to survive, but they were not really living; they were merely existing. For what kind of life does one live with fear and terror constantly knocking at your door?

Gradually, though, discovery and hope entered Leon's life. Oskar Schindler owned the factory in which Leon's father and older brother worked. When Schindler discovered the Leyson family also included a younger son, he arranged for Leon to work in the factory as well. His action allowed Leon to see a light at the end of the tunnel, a flame not consumed by darkness but penetrating it. Schindler's action would ultimately save Leon's life.

From making it a point to learn his Jewish employees' names to slipping Leon extra pieces of bread, Oskar Schindler revealed his humanity. And Oskar Schindler's humanity was Leon Leyson's discovery. In the midst of his pain, during the darkest time of his life, Leon discovered that mercy cannot be fully extinguished.

On February 2, 2011, I was nearly ten years old, just like Leon. I had just been removed from my home because my parents were unstable and incompetent to care for me, and I was forced to move into a home with my great-aunt. When it was determined that I could not stay there, either, I was terribly afraid of what would become of me. But on April 21, 2011, through the discovery and action of a virtual stranger, hope entered my life. My aunt, whom I barely knew, heard about my situation and immediately offered to take me in. And though the prospect frightened me, I believed it would be better than foster care.

Oh, how right I was! For the first time, I knew what it was to feel welcomed, to feel hope. Like Leon Leyson, I discovered a beacon of hope and light at the end of my personal tunnel.

Albert Einstein once said, "The world is a dangerous place to live; not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it." Both Leon Leyson and I were granted the ability to become the people we were meant to be because others discovered us, acknowledged our existence and our pain, and chose to act. In turn, we discovered charity and compassion. And our discovery calls us, too, to act.

Leon Leyson acted by sharing his story through the 1939 Society so that others could discover the humanity of Oskar Schindler, an ordinary businessman who selflessly put himself in harm's way, defying the Nazis and rejecting anti-Semitism to shelter and feed a hungry young boy—and more than a thousand others. I know it is my duty to act on my discovery, as well. I am called to share the compassion I was shown, to live it, and to pass it on. Through my words and deeds, I try to ensure that I will be someone who responds to evil with acts of courage.

That way, my suffering, Leon Leyson's suffering, and the suffering of all who live in turmoil can be a blessing as well as a curse. In the face of suffering, may all of us be people who act, who reveal that humanity cannot be extinguished, and who become a light at the end of the tunnel.