

Savannah Sanford
Thesis Oral Speech
October

Intro:

Thank you all for coming to my thesis presentation! I've been working on this piece for almost a year now and it means a lot to me that everyone is here today. This piece is dedicated to the prevention and awareness of Suicide, and to symbolize the lasting effects on specifically children after this type of loss through a textile installation. Above all this piece is dedicated to my own inner child who's had a constant craving for comfort and feelings of protection because of these events. In telling this story and sharing this piece, I hope to gift others a space of comfort from their own experiences of childhood loss and traumas, especially suicide, or the loss of a parent and also to create conversation surrounding a child's perspective on death and grieving a loved one.

My name is Savannah Sanford, and I'm a printmaking major here at pnca. I first started out in the illustration department but craved a more hands-on physical medium to experiment with for my college experience. This is how I found my place in the printshop and sewing department, where I'm specializing in printed textiles, garments and quilts. Being from Colorado, I've always had a natural inspiration from the nature that I grew up surrounded in- influencing my work with natural dyes, eco printing, and my values of sustainability within my art practices. All of my art pieces use second hand material and dyed with natural, hand foraged pigments and plants. While these processes add a large amount of time into my projects, I find immense joy in finding one of a kind fabric at a thrift store, or foraging my own flowers to dye with, even mixing pigments and boiling down plants reminds me of being a little kid pretend making forest potions with mud and flowers and sticks. Each process of making creates a sense of comfort and nostalgia when creating this piece, and I believe that's why I make the art that I do. This is my first installation and large scale piece, and I welcome you to step inside, and discover every hidden detail and natural process within each panel of fabric.

I first want to tell my story behind this piece and then I'll go into my process and more specific ideas and symbols. When I was only 8 years old, I lost my dad to suicide, which was a huge tragedy to face at such a tender age. Because of this immense trauma, my early childhood is kind of a blur, yet the memories of my grief are still fully transparent. When my dad died, it felt like my world was completely flipped upside-down and I clung on to certain people, things, and places as if it was all I had left. At this time in my grief I barely left my house or bedroom, finding the most comfort wrapped in my baby blanket, snuggled in bed under my pink silk canopy with my 50 stuffed animals. When I think back to how I felt at this time, I remember trying to explain to adults that life felt like a dream and it was

hard to distinguish what was real or not. I had a constant need for comfort and protection, and I started to develop an excessive attachment to my comfort items and people, often my emotions hanging on by a single thread ready to break at anytime.

This transparent, naturally died, and oversized canopy, symbolizes that excessive need for comfort I felt as a child after losing my dad, and how this feeling still extends today. Inspired by my childhood bedroom and comfort space, and my canopy that hung over me each night as I grieved this loss of my dad. I wanted to recreate this piece for my adult self who still craves a space to hide away from my anxieties and discomfort with my childhood trauma. This canopy is reminiscent of a chrysalis, a natural armor that protects that body from the dangers of the outside world. As a child I felt like I constantly needed my armor in order to survive. I needed my comfort items, along with a quiet, safe space to grieve. I'm recreating my childhood canopy for my adult self who still craves that comfort space to this day, as someone who still has her original baby blanket for comfort (even if it exists in threads). Creating a fabric piece was the perfect mode of communication for comfort and the connection to childhood grief, with actual original textiles from my childhood and baby blanket reminiscent fabrics, I was able to create a child-like fort that is immediately nostalgic of childhood. A place of sentience, comfort, and protection from the outside once stepped in.

My thesis has led me to explore the relationship between fabric and comfort, and the importance of comfort objects in a time of need, specifically for children. My comfort item as a child was my baby blanket and I believe that the loss of a parent made this bond or attachment much more intense, my blanket often filling the void of a presence I was lacking. I remember throwing absolute tantrums if I lost my baby blanket, unable to go to bed or leave the house without it. Through doing this project, I've found that I'm not alone in these early attachments, speaking with friends and classmates about their own childhood momentos, baby blankets, or stuffed animals they've had since childhood. Both my sisters had baby blankets as well, and they both still have theirs to this day, existing in shreds of torn and frayed fabric. A friend shared that their baby blanket was irreplaceable as a child; specifically the smell and memories attached to it this piece of fabric was what gave them comfort as a child as well after losing their parent at a young age as well. A classmate also shared how their grandma would quilt them blankets and the significance of it being made by a loved one is what made it so special to them. As I've become an aunt to my niece and nephew, I've watched how from an early age kids become attached to certain toys or blankets from such a young age, often becoming dependent on its presence, controlling their emotions and sense of comfort and safety. All of this has made me explore what makes a piece of fabric so significant to a child's life and emotionally and physically comforting- is it the textures, softness, or the smells and stains, is it because it was gifted or handmade by a significant loved one? Is it because fabric is so malleable and can take

any form? Fabric is capable of holding so many comforting qualities, and my piece touches on each of these- the nostalgic textures and softness, the familiar smells of nature and fabric's natural decay, and the natural degradation of a loved object after time. In the middle of my canopy lies what I have left of my baby blanket, a large hole torn, old stains, all evidence of life-long love and care to this object of comfort.

Symbolisms in piece

Although it's been 15 years since my dad's death, I still have a deep craving for comfort and protection almost anywhere I am. The trauma of losing a parent to suicide and realizing just how fast your world can turn upside down will impact me and my outlook on life forever, realizing it makes you cling on to the things that comfort you most. And it doesn't have to be a loss of a parent or suicide, death itself is ground-rattling, and the grief from it can follow you for life. The need and craving for comfort and protection has followed me through life since I was a child, and I wanted to symbolize this feeling with a textile piece that is almost larger than life. The excessiveness of fabric to this canopy reflects the constant and excessive need for comfort I needed as a child, following me still to this day. The many layers of fabric symbolizes the staggering stages of grief a child goes through after losing a parent to suicide, and showing the lasting effects of suicide and fear that can follow us through life. When a child loses a parent, it's a very complicated process of grief; death is a lot for a child to understand but suicide is something that is a delicate topic, especially around a child. That child must first understand death and that their parent is not coming back, and then has to process that that person ended their own life, and what that all means. As protection, my family didn't share with me the cause of his death until much later, fearing that suicide was too much for a child to process and I'd have to agree. After interviewing my family about this time of grief, protection seems to be their number one priority for me as a child, shielding me from hard truths and realities that a child might not understand. When I did find out many years later in middle school, I felt new emotions of guilt and embarrassment, regret and resentment, and my grief journey started all over again.

The growing and presence of flowers and plants on this piece symbolizes how time can develop understanding and growth of emotions with loss. As I got older, I began to accept what had happened, even finding peace in it as well. I wanted flowers to represent my emotional growth, and the growth we all go through as humans in life, dealing with happiness, catastrophe, life, and death. Loss has made me realize life is all a cycle, with bad things come good, with death comes new life, just like nature. Sometimes life forces us to start all over but we evidently grow back stronger every time. The daisies symbolizing youth, and innocence representing myself as a child and the fragility of loss at a young age, the iris representing hope and faith within the grief process, and my favorite lavender- which symbolizes peace, acceptance, and calmness. Lavender is also connected with the crown chakra, which is the energy center associated with spiritual connectivity and

sentience. On top of this, each fabric is dyed with actual flowers and pigments from nature, fulling encapsulating you fort of flowers.

I also take comfort in the symbols of butterflies, fairies, and wings; as a child I was like a caterpillar creating armor or like a chrysalis, creating a shield of protection from the grief I was facing in my life with my baby blanket and collection of stuffed animals. Butterflies also remind me of home and Colorado, seeing monarchs popular my mom's garden in the summers and finding comfort in their presence. The transparency of the fabrics remind me of butterfly wings, growing with time and to the limits of the space, symbolizing how time and aging can free this constant feeling of fear and dread that greif can cause. Even the shape of the canopy feels like an opening chrysalis, extending and growing into wings; symbolizing freedom and acceptance with death after time. Each fabric is left un-serged, meaning it will easily fray and wither over time. this detail lends to the love comfort items receive and how they age, fray and decay over time, like my baby blanket. Through greif, finding symbols or momentos is a joyful way of finding comfort when missing a loved one. Seeing dragonflies reminds me of my time fishing with my dad on the rivers or lakes in Colorado, where dragonflies are constantly buzzing along the water, searching for their next prey. Seeing the yellowing and orange aspen trees in the Colorado fall will forever remind me of my mom and dad and their favorite season, replicating these colors in my fabrics with actual plants I grew up around.

When thinking of my childhood, im reminded of the vast bnature around me growing up in colorado. My most significant memories with my dad are hiking in the Rocky Mountains, fishing in the Poudre river, or visiting archeological sites near reservations in Wyoming. Today, visiting nature sites and specifically ones in Colorado give me a sense of presense and comfort with memories attached to my dad and I commonly use symbols of nature in my work to represent this relationship of nature and greif. In my thesis I knew I wanted to intertwine the power of fabric and its relationship with comfort, nature, and greif, using natural dyes and sustainable practices that represent my love and respect for nature and the sentience it holds in my life and how I honor memories of my dad.

Each piece of fabric is second-hand, thrifted from Colorado to oregon. Each piece is individually dyed with natural pigments, varying from local plants to Portland, all the way to Colorado wildflowers and vegetables from my mom's own backyard garden. I used a process called bundle-dying or eco printing, first foraging flowers, weeds, berries and vegetables then rolling them within the fabrics; steaming for several hours. I also tried different methods to this- ice dying using a similar method of rolling the fabric and flowers then freezing it overnight. Then you leave it to dethaw in the sun and you come out with even more vibrant colors. It was important to me to go back home to Colorado, and source materials that were significant to my childhood, memories of my dad and even the comfort of my mom. As a child my mom and dad would bring me on weekly hikes, going out to see the vibrant wildflowers during summer season, or the fiery orange and yellow aspens

during the fall. When I think of home and my childhood, I'm met with memories of nature and times of peace outside. After my dad died, my mom even put me in Equestrian therapy in the mountains of Colorado, spending a week outside with horses and other kids who had also just lost a loved one. Nature and specifically Colorado is significant to my childhood and memories of grief and times with my dad. The natural dyes used are a subtle nod to the comfort spaces nature provides and its capabilities to soothe the mind and body, especially during grief. The fabric is even hung at the top with original fishing hooks from my dad, who was an avid fisher and outdoorsman. Subtle acknowledgments to my dad through nature symbols is a way I find comfort in his presence through this piece.

Also the process of creating this piece was like therapy. In order to dye this much fabric, you can imagine the amount of plants I had to forage. From May to September, nearly every single day I would wake up at 6am and go on my flower picking walk, as i called it. While home in Colorado, this included the trails around my childhood home that are overgrown with dandelions, pansies and clover. hiking through the mountains I collected fallen or overgrown flowers and berries. In Portland I took walks through suburban alley ways, picking wildflowers and weeds, sometimes accidentally getting stung by Hogs weed or stinging nettle.

Much of the pigments and flowers i chose to dye with are pink. The use of pink in this installation is not just about its traditional association with femininity but about comfort, warmth, and nurturing. Pink evokes a softness that mirrors the tenderness I needed as a child during my time of grief. It reflects that need for maternal love and protection, the sense of being cared for during a time when my world felt upside down. It's a visual representation of the sanctuary I sought, a space where I could retreat to feel safe again. My mom was such a calming and comforting presence during my grief, and still is today. Along with my two sisters, my grandma and aunts, I come from a nurturing family of females that were very important to me during tough times. Pink bows are also scattered throughout this piece, a symbol also associated to femininity. For me and this piece, represent a sense of childhood innocence, fragility, and the need for protection. They are symbols of something being 'tied' or 'together,' echoing how, as a child, I clung to my comfort objects to feel whole. These bows are not only feminine symbols but also markers of care, tying together the fragile parts of myself that were in need of solace.

Creating this piece was a form of therapy for me. The process itself—from foraging flowers every morning to experimenting with different dyeing methods, sewing more and more fabric onto this canopy—became a meditative act. From May to September, I would wake up early and go on my “flower picking walks,” gathering plants from the wilds of both Colorado and Portland. It was a way to reconnect with nature, with memories of my dad,

and with my own healing process. Art is a powerful mode of therapy and comfort; and it's healing acts have been present my whole life, coming from 2 generations of artists. By using art as a mode of communication of our traumas, were able to create conversation without really talking about it. Ultimately, my hope is that this piece sparks conversation—not just about grief and loss, but also about the ways we can support one another in times of need. If this work can offer comfort to just one person, or help start a conversation about suicide prevention and childhood trauma, then I consider it a success. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people in the U.S., and children who lose a parent to suicide often face complex grief, isolation, and confusion. Art can serve as a powerful tool in processing these emotions, offering a means for self-expression, healing, and connection, and I want to continue to use my art as a mode of communication for my inner child as my art career continues.

This piece is a reflection of my own journey through grief, from a young girl losing her dad to suicide, to now where my adult self still craves comfort 15 years later. While it started as an expression of loss and pain, it has transformed into something that represents resilience and hope. In making this installation, I've found peace in the fact that grief doesn't have to be something that defines us forever—it can become part of our story, a catalyst for growth and change. Tackling the topic of suicide was difficult and uncomfortable, but its important we talk and acknowledge these difficult things in our lives, maybe now for than ever. With my art I choose to take on difficult topics and present them as something beautiful, which is what I tried doing here. As a community of artists right now, I think we're all grieving the current state of the world and afraid of what's to come, but it's important we find these places if solace and moments of inner peace so that we're able to grow and come out stronger.

this piece isn't just about loss—it's about the journey of healing. It's about how we can wrap ourselves in comfort, grow through our pain, and find peace over time. Grief may never fully disappear, but we learn to live with it, and it makes us who we are.

I want to thank my mentor yoshi for assisting me this past year and the past 4 years through printmaking. I also want to thank my family and partner for their support, they're understanding and patience with the messes i made with pigments and dyes that now stain my partner's and I's bathtub and bathroom lol. The pots I've almost ruined boiling down mysterious plants, and nearly infesting my apartment with lady bugs and spiders from bringing so many plants inside. This was a difficult piece to work on with my limited space, studio, and studio apartment. I dont considered this a finished piece, If I had more time and space I would only add even more fabric, embellishments, maybe bring in a component to the floors and seating. I'm still so proud of what I've created here today though, and when I first started this project, coming up with ideas and research, I had no idea how this piece

would come out. This piece took shape through pure experimentation, and accident, but I'm excited to continue pieces like this in the future. After graduating, I plan to get my teaching degree and hopefully teach art to younger aged kids, teaching art as an outlet for emotions and creativity. My art teachers growing up were some of my most important comfort people through these difficult years, often skipping lunch and recess to instead draw and paint in the art rooms. In high school I was an assistant teacher in my school's special education and arts program, which sparked my interest in teaching. I want to be someone that students can come to during hard times, and give support and a space of comfort and protection like my own art teachers did. I'm excited to see where my art career takes me! and with that, thank you all so much for coming and that concludes my little speech here!!