

Feature Writing

Invitational B Meet • 2025



You are a reporter for the **Leaguetown Press**, the student newspaper of Leaguetown High School.

From the given information, write a **feature story** as you would for the high school newspaper. You may use statements attributed to individuals as **direct or indirect quotes**. You may not change the meaning of a statement. You have **one hour**.

Do not write your name or the name of your school on this sheet or your entry. **Put your number on your paper.**

Leaguetown High School has 1,972 students in grades 9-12. While leaving a late basketball game on Jan. 16, senior team captain Raya Hernandez walked toward the back of the student parking lot to her car. She was the last player to leave the locker room and thought she would be the last car to pull out of the parking lot. When she reached her car, she noticed a white Toyota Corolla in the back corner with a man sitting in the passenger seat reading a book. It was her AP English teacher, Owen McFarland. Hernandez knocked on the window, which startled McFarland. When she leaned down to say hello, Hernandez noticed the back seat full of clothes, books and other items.

After a brief conversation, McFarland confirmed that he had been living in his car in the school parking lot since the end of December. On top of student loans and his car payment, he had an emergency appendectomy in August with an extended hospital stay, which cost \$4,000, with school insurance. As a result, he was unable to pay his rent and moved out of his apartment. After staying with friends for several weeks, McFarland decided it would be simpler to work in his classroom until late at night and then sleep in his car.

After hearing his story, Hernandez went home and talked to her parents and some of her fellow teammates and asked them come up with ideas on how to help. She started a GoFundMe to help Hernandez pay down his debt. Since January, she has raised more than \$16,700 for McFarland. In addition, the family of junior Tori Kweiler offered McFarland one of their rental properties for the reduced price of \$200 per month for six months.

McFarland accepted this offer, and on Saturday, Feb. 8, he will move out of his car and into a home. You are writing for the issue of the Press to be distributed Feb. 6.

■ OWEN MCFARLAND, AP English teacher

“I was reading ‘The Shining’ by Stephen King when I heard Raya knock on my window. I read it every year. Her knock made me jump out of my seat. I never intended for anyone to see me in my car. That’s why I parked in the back corner of the parking lot, and I don’t normally park for the night until it’s pretty dark. I guess I’m pretty lucky that she saw me there because thanks to her I feel like I’m getting a second start.

“I’m not really sure how I ended up in this situation to be honest. I’ve always been very responsible with money. I have a credit card, but I always try to pay it off. I’ve been teaching for six years now, but it seems like as each year goes by, I’m living more paycheck-to-paycheck, and I can’t seem to save. My rent for a one-bedroom apartment was \$1,700 a month. To get anything remotely cheaper than that, I need to move two hours away from the school. I even gave my cat to my sister last year because it was too expensive to take

■ OWEN McFARLAND, continued

her to the vet every year. I guess the medical bills were kind of the last straw. I'm grateful to the doctors who took care of me when I went to the emergency room with appendicitis, but I can't believe the cost. I don't qualify for any type of public assistance or public housing because my school salary is decent. There just aren't any affordable apartments anywhere near Leaguetown right now.

"I remember my first night in the car. I went to one of the boys locker rooms to take a shower and brush my teeth. Then I settled into the passenger seat and leaned the seat as far back as it would go. I think I only slept an hour or two the first night, but it got easier as the nights went by. The stress of not being able to pay bills is so overwhelming. I feel like I've been carrying a huge weight on my shoulders that's gone, for now at least.

"I'm so grateful to Raya and the rest of the community for giving me this break. The money from the GoFundMe will pay off my last medical bill and get me set up in my new rental home. I would have never made it this far without my students. I love teaching here. I love this town. I love my students, and I never want to change jobs or do anything else. This school and these people are my true home. I never want to leave."

■ RAYA HERNANDEZ, senior

"When I saw Mr. McFarland in his car that night, I just blurted out, 'Mr. M, are you living in your car?' I can't believe I said it like that, but I'm glad I did. And I'm glad he told me the truth.

"Mr. McFarland is one of the best teachers. I know I'll score high on the AP test and do well in college, and he's part of the reason. I wasn't about to let someone that important to me sleep in his car.

"After we talked in the parking lot that night and I set up the GoFundMe, I didn't talk to him much about it again because I didn't want to embarrass him or make him feel bad. We had tons of parents make pretty big donations to get to \$16,700. A few friends and I went to go visit him last week after school to tell him about the money and the house. When we pulled up the app on my phone to show him the amount we raised, his face fell to his hands, and he cried and hugged us. He's a great English teacher, but another thing he's taught me is that you never know what someone else is going through. I don't even think I did that much. But I know you can make a big difference with a little kindness."

■ TORI KWELLER, junior

"My parents have rental properties all over town. Luckily, we had a tenant move out of a house this month, and no one had rented it yet. They were willing to rent a house to Mr. McFarland for a discounted rate for six months. At the end of that time, he can either stay and pay the normal rent, or my parents said they will help him try to find another place. This will get him through the summer, at least. He's an incredible teacher. We laugh so much in his class. You would have never thought he didn't have a place to live. He never said anything or even dropped a hint about it."

■ JUANA JONES, principal

"It's upsetting that we could have a respected teacher on this campus who doesn't have a place to live. I plan to meet with our superintendent this week to make sure we're offering all the resources we can to keep the best teachers in our district."

DO NOT DISTRIBUTE TO STUDENTS BEFORE OR DURING THE CONTEST!

Invitational B Meet • 2025 Feature Writing Contest Tips and Sample Story

Contest Director: Give one copy to each judge to use during critiquing/judging. Also, staple one copy of the contest and one copy of the contest tips to each student's returned entry. The purpose of the tips is to provide immediate feedback to students. However, it is not meant to replace written comments from the judge.

1. Figure out what the story is about and its theme or focus. This story is about a teacher who has been living in his car and the student who helped him raise money and find a place to live.

2. The lead of a feature story must grab the reader's attention. It does not have to be a certain length or include the 5Ws and H. It should set a scene and get the reader into the story. Although you have freedom to describe the scene as you think it might have existed, try to stay close to the prompt. Judges will not want you to wander off the subject too much.

He had settled in for the night with a book — “The Shining” by Stephen King. AP English teacher Owen McFarland liked to end his long days of teaching by reading before bed. But on this night, a knock on his Toyota Corolla's passenger side window would change everything.

“I just blurted out, ‘Mr. M, are you living in your car?’ I can't believe I said it like that, but I'm glad I did,” senior Raya Hernandez said. “And I'm glad he told me the truth.”

After being hit with some medical bills and losing his apartment, McFarland had been working late nights at school and sleeping in his car each night. Hernandez spotted him on her way home from a late basketball game.

3. Once you get past the lead, make sure you include a nut graph. It tells the reader what the story will be about. Follow the nut graph with a direct quote and then go into the transition/quote formula.

nut graph

She went home and spoke with her parents and friends about how to help their teacher get back on his feet. She started a GoFundMe and last week surprised him with the total: \$16,700 so far. And on top of that, another student's family offered to let McFarland move into one of their rental properties for a discounted rate. He'll move out of his car and into that house Feb. 8.

direct quote

“I remember my first night in the car,” McFarland said. “I went to one of the boys locker rooms to take a shower and brush my teeth. Then I settled into the passenger seat and leaned the seat as far back as it would go. I think I only slept an hour or two the first night, but it got easier as the nights went by.”

4. After the nut graph, the rest of the story can tell itself through the use of transition/quote formula. Be sure you attribute after the quote or at least after the first sentence. An attribution should be: subject of attribution followed by the verb of attribution (“McFarland said” not “said McFarland”). Avoid putting two or more quotes together without placing some kind of transition between them. Also, make sure transitions provide information to help the action of the story and that the quote does not repeat information in the transition.

transition/story-telling

McFarland was paying \$1,700 for a one bedroom apartment near the high school and covering student-loans, but after an emergency appendectomy in August left him with more than \$4,000 in medical bills, he said he was unable to continue paying rent. He even gave his cat to his sister last year because he could not afford the vet bills.

direct quote

“I’ve always been very responsible with money,” he said. “I have a credit card, but I always try to pay it off. I’ve been teaching for six years now, but it seems like as each year goes by, I’m living more paycheck-to-paycheck and I can’t seem to save.”

5. Always use third person. Don’t say “our student” or “our students.” Also, do not editorialize. For instance, you should not say “Go Raya!” These statements are personal opinions and should not be used in a feature story.

6. Always use the verb “said” as the verb of attribution. Don’t say “says,” “stated,” “feels” or any other synonym for “said.”

7. Finally, look for a strong quote to use as a closing statement or a statement that will bring the reader back to the beginning of the story. It should give the reader a sense of satisfaction or resolution.

McFarland said he will use the money Hernandez collected to pay off his last medical bills and set up his new house.

“I would have never made it this far without my students,” he said. “I love teaching here. I love this town. I love my students, and I never want to change jobs or do anything else. This school and these people are my true home.”

SAMPLE STORY

He had settled in for the night with a book — “The Shining” by Stephen King. AP English teacher Owen McFarland liked to end his long days of teaching by reading before bed. But on this night, a knock on his Toyota Corolla’s passenger side window would change everything.

“I just blurted out, ‘Mr. M, are you living in your car?’ I can’t believe I said it like that, but I’m glad I did,” senior Raya Hernandez said. “And I’m glad he told me the truth.”

After being hit with some medical bills and losing his apartment, McFarland became unhoused and slept in his car each night. Hernandez spotted him on her way home from a late basketball game.

After talking with her parents and friends, Hernandez started a GoFundMe. Last week, she surprised him with the total: \$16,700 so far. And on top of that, another student’s family offered to let McFarland move into one of their rental properties for a discounted rate. He’ll move out of his car and into that house Feb. 8.

“I remember my first night in the car,” McFarland said. “I went to one of the boys locker rooms to take a shower and brush my teeth. Then I settled into the passenger seat and leaned the seat as far back as it would go. I think I only slept an hour or two the first night, but it got easier as the nights went by.”

McFarland was paying \$1,700 for a one bedroom apartment near the high school and covering student-loans, but after an emergency appendectomy in August left him with more than \$4,000 in medical bills, he said he was unable to continue paying rent. He even gave his cat to his sister last year because he could not afford the vet bills.

“I’ve always been very responsible with money,” he said. “I have a credit card, but I always try to pay it off. I’ve been teaching for six years now, but it seems like as each year goes by, I’m living more paycheck-to-paycheck and I can’t seem to save.”

McFarland said his salary is too high for him to qualify for public assistance or public housing and that to find an apartment for lower rent, he would have to move two hours away from the school.

“Mr. McFarland is one of the best teachers,” Hernandez said. “I know I’ll score high on the AP test and do well in college, and he’s part of the reason. I wasn’t about to let someone that important to me sleep in his car.”

Junior Tori Kweller said her parents will rent McFarland a house for \$200 per month for six months. At that point, he can extend his lease, or they will help him find an affordable rental.

“He’s an incredible teacher,” Kweller said. “We laugh so much in his class. You would have never thought he didn’t have a place to live. He never said anything or even dropped a hint about it.”

McFarland said he will use the money Hernandez collected to pay off his last medical bills and set up his new house.

“I would have never made it this far without my students,” he said. “I love teaching here. I love this town. I love my students, and I never want to change jobs or do anything else. This school and these people are my true home.”