

April 25, 2008

'Art saved my life': Columbine survivor to graduate from CMU

MOUNT PLEASANT — On the verge of graduating from Central Michigan University May 3, Sarah Gillings has many reasons for excitement and optimism — from her impending motherhood to the awards she has won for her photography to her anticipated career in graphic design.

But ask the Colorado native how she came to be an artist, how she got to CMU or how she ended up in Michigan, and one word sums it up: Columbine.

Gillings was a 15-year-old freshman at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., on April 20, 1999, the day that fellow students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 12 students and a teacher before killing themselves.



Courtesy photo

“Experiencing something like that and being there ... has a heart-stopping effect,” said Gillings, who was not injured in the attack.

Sadly, the shootings were not the last tragedy for Gillings, who in the year that followed lost a popular schoolmate to suicide and another friend to a car accident before two of her friends were found murdered in a restaurant. The murders were the final straw for Gillings, who — even at 16 years old — knew she needed a change of scenery.



“Alternative Demise” by Sarah Gillings

“I said to my parents, ‘I have to go. I’m next,’ and they packed up and moved our whole life,” she said, recalling the family’s decision to relocate to Sterling and live near her grandparents. “They gave me the gift of safety and gave up everything to come here; it gave me a whole new perspective on (the meaning of) ‘anything for my family.’”

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Gillings, who had started taking photography classes after the shootings, signed up for the Bay-Arenac Intermediate School District's graphic design program after arriving at Standish-Sterling High School, finding a field that allowed her to combine her passions for art, design and photography while also giving her a therapeutic outlet for the dark feelings brought on by her life experiences.

"Art saved my life," she said. "I can't think about the 'what ifs'."

And it has turned out that Gillings has a knack for art, having captured three national awards for her work in the past two years. Most recently, a color photograph titled "Wilted" earned an award of merit in the color photography category of the 2008 Brass Ring Awards and an Award for Outstanding Achievement in CMU's 2008 Annual Student Exhibition. In 2007, she took first and third places in that category for her works "Alternative Demise" and "Rooted," respectively.

Grateful for the opportunities she has had since moving to Michigan and coming to CMU, Gillings said she has become much more open about discussing her experiences as a survivor of a terrifying tragedy that the nation will never forget.

"I have a very blessed life," she said. "And if one child, parent or teacher hearing my story or talking to me can be saved (from school violence or its aftermath), that's why I'm here."

Gillings' plans include being a stay-at-home mother while also starting her own graphic design and photography business.

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