



## Gabriella Selders

### WINNER OF THE 2023 WRITING APPALACHIA CONTEST

### MAJOR

Pre-Pharmacy

### HOME

Morgantown, West Virginia

### ESSAY

The Pawpaw Festival inspired me. I only like a certain few types of pawpaws, but when I grew interested in submitting a piece to the Writing Appalachia contest, I decided to write something about them. The beginning of my piece is heavily influenced by Goldilocks and the Three Bears, but with tasting pawpaws. The end part of my piece is a more personal essay on how I view pawpaws and Appalachia.

### WHY WRITING MATTERS

Writing is something that has grown with me. It reflects a lot that I can't relate to others in normal conversation. I discovered my passion for writing when I was in elementary school. During highschool, writing soothed and eased my anxieties as I matured into an adult. Writing may be an art form, but it's a lifeline to me.

## The Paw-Paw Story

In the dense woods, out beyond the winding river, a little cottage's kitchen lights wearily burned on as a girl wearing a blue handkerchief around her hair thumbed through the pages of an old recipe book. She was in the mood to bake something for her granny who lived in the holler over. A page stuck out to her: pawpaw bread pudding, an old family recipe. The girl tied her apron, set out some bowls and ingredients, and went to her fridge to pull out a carton of pawpaws. Unfortunately for the girl, there wasn't a single pawpaw inside. The girl huffed before picking up a wicker basket and headed out the door. For the perfect pawpaw bread pudding for her granny, she'd need the best pawpaws.

The morning mist settled into the valleys as the sun peaked between the mountains. The girl with the blue handkerchief stepped over rocks and roots as she walked farther into the woods to find a pawpaw tree. She stumbled across the first pawpaw tree that had low-hanging branches grown in the shade. The fruit had beautiful green skin with only a few fruits filling the tree, but the girl picked one of them anyway. She sliced it open with her hunting knife to find a tasteless flavor and less than-valuable texture. Gross, she thought as she picked the seeds out to bury them nearby, these pawpaws aren't good enough for Granny

The next pawpaw tree she could find had higher branches due to the sunlight that cascaded through the leaves above. The girl reached for the first branch to tug herself up the tree. The fruits in this tree were bigger with rich green skin. She cut open one of the large fruits to reveal sturdy flesh that tasted starchy like a banana. Not quite what I need, she thought as she set the fruit away, but it would make a great stew.

The farther she continued into the forest, the more the girl became discouraged. The perfect pawpaw bread pudding for Granny seemed to grow slimmer in possibility with each step. Before she could give up hope, a lone pawpaw tree stood at the edge of a cliffside. The branches were high and difficult to get, but the girl with the blue handkerchief would not go to the cottage empty-handed. She set the wicker basket against the bottom of the tree, stepped onto it, and then jumped to grab onto a branch. Careful not to lean too far in fear of falling, she picked one. The fruit was not as abundant or beautifully green as the other trees, but she decided to give it a try. Inside the pawpaw was a soft, yellow flesh that perfumed a scent like tropical fruit. She bit into the fruit, surprised that sweet, nectary juice danced on her tongue. Soon, she filled her wicker basket with enough pawpaws for Gran's bread pudding.

Pawpaws are relatively new to me, even though I have lived in West Virginia. I went to my first Pawpaw Festival a few years ago, where I tried one for the first time. It is so bewitching that Appalachia has a fruit like this, along with many other interesting edible plants that grow in our hills. Recently, during the 2023 Pawpaw Festival at the Arboretum, I tried a striking few varieties: starchy Allegheny, soft Shenandoah, tasteless Potomac, and sweet Wabash. A chef even prepared a delicious pawpaw bread pudding, which inspired me enough to write it into the story. Falling down the rabbit hole, I wondered why pawpaws are so iconic. They are not widely known anywhere other than the regions that grow them. Pawpaws can be grown in shady or sunny areas, possess several different flavors and textures, and are vital environmentally to the mountain ecosystems. For thousands of years, clusters of pawpaws have been growing long before Indigenous Americans began to cultivate them. Pawpaws have a short harvest season right before autumn begins. The pawpaws' purpose may not be to be beloved by the masses, but it may be to tell the Appalachian story. They are resilient, necessary, and diverse, just like people I have met in Appalachia.

The people in Appalachia tend to be overlooked by those who try to snapshot our culture into a little picture. I've heard so many different stories that chaste different hues; tales of coal miners unionizing, poems of bringing attention to underserved communities, and even menus in local restaurants narrate hidden dialogues. Growing up, the diversity here had always been apparent to me. Now, I can see Appalachian people much like the pawpaw fruit, a hidden diamond in the rough.

The biggest threat to pawpaws is climate change and deforestation, but lack of knowledge causes many to be unaware of this. It was not apparent how little is known about the pawpaw fruit by others on campus until passing conversation when I was met with a confused gaze and asked, "What is a pawpaw?". The purpose I hold within me is to preserve the story of Appalachia by teaching others about things that make these lands unique. Sharing stories helps advocate for plants who do not have a literal voice. The more information spread about pawpaws guarantees more measures people will take to protect them and other important biodiversity in our mountains. I am proud of being Appalachian with the privilege of eating pawpaws, something many can't say they have. Hopefully, I will find the right pawpaws one day to make a bread pudding and continue making a difference so many more bread puddings will follow.