1st Place Senior Essay

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***The Next Upstander***

Last February, I became interested in Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* after an infographic project in my “Race in American History” elective demonstrated how the underrepresentation of Latino/a educational instructors affects the number of low-income, first-generation Latino students going to college. As an educational activist and philosopher, Freire emphasized the importance of creating a teaching system that actively empowers students, since traditional classrooms create an oppressor-oppressed relationship between the teacher and student that parallels the oppression of minority groups inside and outside of a classroom. While Freire didn’t physically fight anyone, he and Barraco found ways, one as an educator and the other as a soldier, to use their resources and abilities to stand up for the weak and downtrodden. Both of them identified problems with the status quo, and rather than accepting or ignoring injustice and inequality, these two activist worked tirelessly to undermine unjust systemic policies and regimes. These two figures exemplify a form of community engagement and advocacy that sets an example for how society must find ways to eliminate any chance of militant dictators like Hitler from coming to power again or general injustice from remaining a structuring principal of society.

Hearing tales from my grandma about her experiences growing up in a Japanese-occupied Korean village showed me the ease with which anyone can become a bystander. In her small village, a Japanese soldier arrested her neighbor for distributing anti-Japanese pamphlets. My grandma recognized the gravity of her neighbor’s actions and quickly crumbled up that same pamphlet in her fist to dispose of any evidence linking her to her neighbor. As the beating of this dissident began in the center of the village circle, everyone had a clear view. When my grandma asked to help their fellow neighbor, nobody stepped in, either fearful for their own safety, or unwilling to be a part of the rebel movement. As a teenager, my grandmother was physically helpless to stop the soldier from beating her neighbor before taking him away in a truck. Unfortunately, her neighbor never returned; even after the war, my grandma never found out what happened to him. For me, my grandma’s experience was a powerful testimony to the consequences being a bystander. Without anybody offering a voice of resistance, this man fell victim to violence and, most likely, death.

Soon after Allied soldiers uncovered the first concentration camps, a common refrain was “how?” How could this genocide have been approved, let alone perpetrated? How did people not know about it? How could mankind justify such atrocity? All of these questions can be answered with one word: ignorance. When people heard rumors about these camps during the war, many chose embrace false ignorance and ignore calls for help because they weren’t directly affected by these horrors. Instead they looked to Hitler for reassurance and rationalization for everything taking place. Fortunately, there were those like Barraco who rejected Hitler and the oppression he stood for, acknowledged what was really happening, and fought to ensure the safety of Jews and other victims. Even though she was beaten and her husband murdered, her resistance never ceased. And while Barraco’s efforts couldn’t have prevented the deaths of eleven million Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Roma and others, her actions breathed humanity and moral sensibility into a world that has given in to our animalistic natures.

Because of my location in a remote, rural high school, I haven’t had to witness or combat human cruelty like Barraco or my grandmother. Still, through the example of Freire’s educational activism, I recognize my own opportunity to help undermine ignorance and systemic injustices that have become part of today’s status quo. I see educational reform as a way to provide greater intellectual opportunities to historically undermined student populations. If I can ensure minorities have a voice in society, I believe I can effectively fight the ignorance reflected in recent legislative policies and growing waves of nationalism.

After studying Freire’s educational theories this summer, I returned to my school this year committed to address the factors that produce inequality through my work with El Club. As the leader of El Club, my school’s Latino heritage club, I encouraged members to consider how our work could not only celebrate culture but also address educational disparities. Developing BilingualCT.org with El Club has allowed me to provide links to educational and scholarship opportunities for Latino students. Listening to the experiences of Barraco and my grandma and then channeling Freire’s crusade against educational injustices into my own social justice efforts, I’ve come to understand that battling ignorance can take multiple shapes and forms. Regardless, the driving ideal to make the world a better place matters because these efforts and stories serve to eliminate the willful ignorance that has hurt too many people already. It’s this awareness work that will transform the bystander into the position of upstander. The next question is, will the next upstander be you?