

Third Place (tied) Junior Essay
Brooke Eubanks
Chickahominy Middle School, Cheryl Clarke

A Glow in the Distance

Michael Josephson once said, “People of character do the right thing even if no one else does, not because they think it will change the world, but because they refuse to be changed by the world.” After watching several documentaries on the Holocaust, I still cannot fully understand how and why it happened. How could any human being with character participate in the systematic imprisonment and slayings of innocent people? The Holocaust was more than six years of careful planning to avoid detection. The irony of such events, when exposed, is a bright light flickering on the hate that exists for all to see. It forces each of us to stop and take inventory of our own personal values and whether or not we possess the type of character that would preserve human rights or destroy them. I am encouraged by the words of survivors that not all humanity is lost. Survivors have gone on to lead productive lives. They have refused to let the events of the Holocaust change them in a way that keeps them imprisoned. But, we, as leaders and followers, still have a lot more work ahead of us.

Hitler’s actions came not only from expert knowledge of Germany and surrounding countries, but also from his shrewd assessment of human nature – looking at human beings as projections of what he could convince a bystander to believe they should not be, and not as they actually were. In other words, he manipulated his followers into believing persons of Jewish descent were animals because they were of a different race. This is why it is vital for global citizens to designate themselves as guardians of human rights. We must never forget you and I are human beings; we are not tokens of a race or pieces of property to be burned and then discarded.

In looking back at the Holocaust, leaders and politicians became aware of Hitler's concentration camps and failed to appropriately react or even respond. They failed to do the right thing. Leaders often speak about prioritizing trust in their positions when they want something from their followers. But where is the public trust in who and what we are as human beings when leaders fail to address human rights issues they know about? In order to have trust, the relationship between leaders and followers must be somewhat fiduciary; otherwise, trust can neither be established nor maintained.

Hitler used lies to sell the idea that people were unworthy of life and should be executed. People in 1939 did not have access to information like we do today. In today's world, we must use the technology we have to advance communication across the globe and fact check what is placed in front of us. Misinformation still exists, but at least we have access to more information. And, we can research information ourselves and share the truth more openly instead of relying on politicians or the media. As someone who knows change starts with each and every one of us, I personally hold myself accountable for what I know or don't know. I proactively research, research, and research. I then share the truth of what I learn with those around me. I would like to think that had the internet been available in 1939, the Holocaust would not have happened the way that it did; it would have been detected early, and the earth would now be six million people richer.

As election time nears in the United States, I am reminded of our obligation as citizens. We must vet leaders to understand what their true character and motivations are for wanting to hold office. Are they who they say they are or do they have a personal agenda, like Hitler, that would harm the human race? Would they uphold the Constitution or mold and manipulate it to benefit a select few? We must ask questions, use critical thinking skills with reasoning, and determine whether or not their values, morals, and motivations are in keeping with our human rights.

We must also have the courage to hold ourselves and leaders accountable when behavior is damaging to others and thus puts us all at risk. There have been times when public officials have said and done inappropriate things. It called into question their character. For example, a governor's medical school yearbook pictures surfaced where he was either the person wearing blackface or the person wearing a KKK costume. While he did apologize for poor judgment, he did not suffer any real consequences other than his Facebook page being filled with negative comments. But now that we are aware of this picture, can we really say this person could be objective on African-American issues? What if these pictures had surfaced when he was a candidate for office? Would that have changed whether or not he was elected? Personally, I am deeply concerned as to why these pictures did not surface when he was a candidate.

Finally, if we are to have any hope of a better future we must always remember events in world history. The Holocaust illustrates what happens when one person's character goes unchecked. We must not let any one person or group have limitless power. We should, instead, work to have the power shared amongst us, look for innovative ways to motivate one another to take ownership of our actions, and place human rights and dignity of all persons first. There must be a time when we, as guardians of human rights, say, "Enough!" Each of us can become a glow of hope from a distance for someone on the other side of the globe who may be suffering, or someone from another country can be a glow of hope for us. Let's use our voices and sense of humanity together to affect positive changes and to ultimately avoid another Holocaust. After all, Holocaust survivor Kitty Hart-Moxon said it best when she returned to Auschwitz: "The Jews went first. Who is going to be next? You?"