

First Place - High School

Freedom of Expression

When I first wrote the article, I didn't think much of it. I had published opinions in our school's newspaper several times before so it wasn't anything new. The content, however, I had thought about since I first moved to the school district. The op-ed itself was a critique of the glorification of tradition within my high school using an analogy of an upcoming event.

The event was called Powder Puff and it featured female students being "taught" by male students on how to play football, eventually resulting in a major game between the two teams. This was incredibly outdated as our football team already had female athletes on it. The boys who were supposed to be "coaching" needed no prerequisite of knowledge of or experience playing football – just a convenient gender. Further, a non-binary student had asked to participate at the event and, via the rules, was promptly turned down. In my mind, the event itself was a clear and honest depiction of old traditions that still reigned supreme throughout the school. Others didn't share that same sentiment.

The article was printed and delivered to over a thousand students this past October as part of that month's print issue. Usually, the first few pages of the article are read and the rest is left scattered across hallways and classrooms. To a certain degree, that's what happened this time – my article was on page six. In between first and second period, however, that changed. One of my senior friends stopped me to let me know their whole AP Literature class was dedicated to discussing my article. A few hours later, a different friend told me the same happened in her

class. I saw five different groups of people reading my article as I walked to lunch. Little did I know that that same day, the heads of Student Council were having a meeting with the principal and superintendent of the whole district. I later discovered their conversation was dedicated to one little disruption on page six of *The Merionite*.

Needless to say, I was mortified. I couldn't stop re-reading it to see if I had made any errors. All the facts seemed to line up over and over. But by some strange alignment, a meeting with all of the department chairs was held that very afternoon. The school newspaper's sponsor happened to be the Social Studies Department Chair and, by his evaluation, the meeting was a mess. His fellow chairs discussed the article as well, calling into question its role in the event and how it "slandered the name of the administration" – granted, it did. They discussed taking my article down and requested a formal apology be written in place of it. They even mentioned lawsuits and the suspension of the school newspaper for good. Upon hearing this, I was primarily embarrassed but quickly became furious. If I thought people reading the article was bad, the idea of it being banned and censored because it reflected poorly on the very institution I was critiquing was so much worse.

The truth was that whether people's comments were praise or slander, it opened up meaningful conversations. Never before had I heard students so willing to engage in discussion and argument with me and fellow peers. Never, in my time at the school, had I seen proof that administrators actually read the newspapers they reluctantly took from our eager hands. Never had I seen, as I later would, tangible change come from some 800-word opinion piece.

Specifically, I recall a large group chat with eight class officers – the body in charge of planning the Powder Puff – in which one of the seniors brought up my article. Most of the members of the chat hadn't read my article. Upon reading the text and not realizing I was present, a fellow senior quickly texted, "That's stupid. It's tradition." I had never felt my point so proven.

A couple weeks later, I was called into a meeting. Present was the principal, all sixteen class officers, five Student Council representatives and, sitting directly across the nine-foot table from me in an almost comical metaphor, was the Athletics and Activities Director. The meeting started out civil.

We discussed the critiques of the article and the plan moving forward with the Powder Puff games. I immediately was thrown dozens of questions and concerns from everyone present. The resolution seemed to be "We'll deal with it next year," and I thought I was ready for the exhausting meeting to be done with just that as a result. But then I remembered the one non-binary student who still wouldn't be able to play. I looked directly at the Athletics and Activities Director and asked him "Should we tell this student they won't be able to play?" He got flustered and quickly began to spew out anything but a response. I continued, "I'm wondering if we care about student acceptance and inclusion all the time or just when it's convenient?" He said nothing. Two days later, I got an answer to my questions in the form of an amendment that the rules of Powder Puff will no longer be based on gender.

The importance of freedom of expression has never been greater. The voices and opinions of students and youth can create change and a better world for us, now and in the future. My story

is just one of few success stories. I would argue that freedom of expression has three central components–

The first is support. I was incredibly privileged to have a platform to voice my opinion and a community to accept and respect my ideas enough to talk about them. The importance of student voice and expression is equivalent to the importance of youth’s minds, ideas, and perceptions. The modern heroes of our time are and continue to be those who see the world through a new lens. The youth aren’t desensitized to the animosities with which many of us have become comfortable. But expression isn’t just about providing a platform, it is about providing support. We must equip our youth with the skills they need to make the changes they want to see. Equal education, facts, and reality are all in peril – especially now. Contemporary conflict exposes the realities of all of these issues and the older generations must be ready to lift us up instead of silence us.

The second is responsibility. The youth are not burdenless. Our voices have weight and impact and, as with all things that come with weight and impact, responsibilities. We must be responsible for ensuring we are spreading justifiable truth. We cannot simply sprint to our work and fact check it once it gains traction as I did with my article. We need to have the foresight to know that anything we write or say is important and therefore needs to be accurate. Like so many things that must change, our generation should stand as a dam to the rampant misinformation of today rather than a wave.

The final is persistence. When I was tired and hungry and ready for lunch, I was also ready to give up in that meeting. I felt the hardships and burden change sometimes takes and I didn't think I was ready to bear it. It was only with persistence that I knew I needed to make a final statement that led to the actual change. Voices of the youth cannot give up hope. Nothing about change is easy – especially when everyone else at the table might have forty years on you. But what's important is that we keep faith and a mindset that change is possible. We cannot give up when things are hard and we cannot simply stop when we fall down.

These three components of expression and, specifically, student expression serve as a platform on which we are individually able to create change. The ideas we have create impact and the freedom to express those ideas is crucial. Whether it be a small change to a local sports event like my story or major societal change, it begins with expression. The truth is that our world is broken and plagued with dire need for reform. But to do this, we must listen to each other and fight to have all voices heard. Just as every storm starts with a raindrop, every movement starts with a voice of expression.