

Third Place Winner
Division II – 10-12th Grades
Modern Heroes
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The Syrian War, having gone on for five years, has wreaked havoc and destruction on the entire country. Over 400,000 people have died, many more have been displaced from their homes, and bombings regularly destroy neighborhoods, schools, and businesses on a catastrophic scale (The White Helmets). A large coalition of Syrian men and women volunteer on a daily basis to mitigate the casualties; this group, formally the Syrian Civil Defense, is called the ‘White Helmets’. Arriving quickly on the sites of bombings, they risk their lives to rescue men, women, and children trapped in the rubble, following the motto: “to save a life is to save all of humanity” (The White Helmets). Because of the risk of more bombs being dropped, many volunteers have died while rescuing innocent civilians. Their sacrifice truly embodies “moral courage”, or the willingness to sacrifice your life or your safety for the lives or safety of others. Moral courage is exemplified in many ways, including physically aiding those who cannot help themselves at the risk of dying or being injured, empowering and educating about a crisis even if your own life could be threatened, or enduring emotional trauma to help others. The White Helmets do all of these things and more, truly symbolizing heroism in the modern day.

Thanks to this exceptional volunteer organization, almost 80,000 Syrians have been rescued in a span of only three years. The White Helmets, however, have lost 154 volunteers in the process (Support the White Helmets, para. 1-6). White Helmets regularly throw themselves into chaos and danger, risking death, to rescue helpless civilians, and yet they still display unwavering commitment to the task. They are directly targeted by “two tap strikes”, or bombings in which more bombs are dropped as the volunteers arrive at the rubble and ashes of a previous strike. Furthermore, White Helmets endure immense emotional trauma. Oftentimes they find individuals who have already died or cannot be saved; even more heartbreaking and in conflict with their religious traditions, they are commonly forced to leave bodies that will never receive a proper burial. Despite the utter despair by which they are surrounded, the volunteers are unwaveringly hopeful and supportive of one another, and in this way, they again exemplify moral courage. One particularly inspiring example of the White Helmet’s work was when a baby, who was only a week old and stuck in rubble for 16 hours, was saved. The baby, named Mahmoud, is nicknamed the “miracle baby” and is adored by the volunteers (The White Helmets). He and the thousands of other souls saved by the White Helmets are symbols for the sacrifice and bravery of the organization’s volunteers.

The White Helmets have promoted peace in one of the most conflicted regions in the world as well as set an example for people globally. The huge amount of people they have saved in Syria could alone prove that the White Helmets have worldwide influences, but their influence reached new heights with the increased global focus on the group. A recent short film, *The White Helmets*, depicted the volunteer group’s efforts in promoting the safety and welfare of Syrians in

a time of danger and fear; however, the group has become a target, especially due to the increased attention. After winning the Right Livelihood Award, three White Helmet facilities in Aleppo were destroyed (Malsin 24). The spotlight on the White Helmets has in many ways put them into more danger; despite this, the awards and movies have been immensely beneficial in educating people worldwide about the circumstances in Syria. Their stance as a neutral force in saving lives has also set a precedent volunteer work on this scale. They have raised the bar for everyone in the world in terms of bravery and moral strength and proved by example that modern heroes exist.

I have personally had profound privilege in my life from my education to my safety and more. During my high school education I have become more aware of, and grateful for, these privileges. As a result of my privilege and education, it is my responsibility to take advantage of the opportunities I have to further the strength, the voice, and the status of groups who have been targeted, murdered, abused, or abandoned. The White Helmets come from a wide range of backgrounds, but none of these backgrounds constituted a great deal of privilege. Despite this, they regularly sacrifice their safety and privilege that they have left for the lives of others. They are not only exemplars for moral courage; they are modern heroes, my role models, and inspirations for greatness in individuals with or without privilege. If they are able to do such tremendous actions of kindness, bravery, and sacrifice without the opportunities that I have, how can I not do the same? Ultimately, I hope to serve those who are most in need by using my education to become a doctor. Someday I hope to volunteer affordable or free services to groups that most need it. Abu Omar, speaking about his service as a White Helmet, expressed that “it’s my duty, my humanitarian duty. I will never quit as long as I’m still alive.” Mohammed Farah, Abu Omar’s colleague, also wholeheartedly described his volunteering: “I am willing to sacrifice my soul for the sake of the people. This job is sacred” (The White Helmets). I can think of nothing more fulfilling than to someday view my own work in a similar way and each of these heroes inspire me to hold myself to a higher personal standard of moral courage.

Bibliography

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