

First Place Winner
Division II – 10-12th Grades
We Who Will Not Be Silenced
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“Gay people, we will not win our rights by staying quietly in our closets... We are coming out to fight the lies, the myths, the distortions. We are coming out to tell the truths about gays, for I am tired of the conspiracy of silence, so I’m going to talk about it. And I want you to talk about it. You must come out” (“The Official”).

What makes moral courage? For some, it’s deeds accomplished in times of immense suffering, standing out against some horrific giant that controls the masses, and while this is an entirely valid definition, it is not every day we find ourselves face to face with a monster to slay by helping those who cannot help themselves. No, the true monsters in our society are the ones that sprung out from our own twisted minds. Inequality, prejudice, and hate; it takes true moral courage to stand up to the things so ingrained in society that they seem true despite obvious contradictions. As an LGBTQ+ person, I face homophobia, and I had to look back to those with true moral courage to find mine.

Harvey Milk was the first openly homosexual man to be elected into office. Elected in 1977, he was expressing his sexuality in a time that was not so accepting as we assume the one is today. Before becoming some nationally recognized ‘gay icon’ he was a young man who joined the Navy; unfortunately, questions of his sexuality pushed him into ‘retirement’. Milk wasn’t always some flamboyant leader; he was finding his way in a time when homosexuals weren’t allowed to (“The Official”). After expressing his sexuality, Milk moved to Castro Street in San Francisco, which was rapidly becoming known for its LGBTQ+ community. Milk never had trouble standing for what he believed in. He protested the Vietnam War; he brought order and unification to the LGBTQ+ Communities of Castro Street; and he fought for homosexual rights whenever he could. This was how he came to politics. Milk ran for office in 1972; however, the support of Castro Street was not enough to get him elected. He continued fighting and ran again in 1975, where he narrowly lost. Though he’d attracted the attention of George Moscone, the mayor at the time, and Moscone appointed him to the Board of Permit Appeals that same year, making him the first openly gay city commissioner (Pearson). However, Milk was still determined to get elected into office, so he continued running. In one of his speeches, ‘You’ve got to have Hope’, Milk described why he was running, stated it was “because I think there is a tremendous and vital difference between a “friend of the Gay community” and an avowed Gay in public office. Gays have now been slandered nationwide. We have been tarred with the brush of pornography... It is [not enough] to have a ‘friend’ represent us, no matter how good a ‘friend’ he or she may be” (Milk).

Even with all the controversy over homosexuals at the time, Milk struggled and eventually got elected in 1977 as a City-County Supervisor. Of course, this didn’t sit well with many; Milk received daily death threats and was anticipating that he would be assassinated while in office (“The Official”). Even so, he did not back down pushing his ideals of protecting the minorities and standing strong, saying, “if a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door” (“The Official”). In the end, he was assassinated on November 27, 1978. His

death struck the nation and thousands gathered to mourn. This was a man who had become so famous around the country for breaking the social norm by accepting his sexuality. His life inspired countless people, and many of those who gathered came out.

Harvey Milk had the moral courage to stand in front of the nation's gun and take the bullet, and while I can't say I'm anywhere near brave enough to do the same, I can say that I'm inspired to try. When I first began to question my sexuality, it wasn't exactly an easy slide into the realization that I liked girls; it was more like jumping off of a cliff and falling until I realized that I had wings. They were giant, beautiful wings crafted by a variety of historically prominent LGBTQ+ people, one of the most important being Harvey Milk. The fact that he stood proud for what he believed in, for what he was; first time I started to think that I could do the same. So I did. I stepped up and accepted my sexuality, and while some parts took longer than others, I knew that I could never stop fighting. Of course, I've been met with vicious glares and words that make my breath catch in my throat, but I can no longer be silent. I've been afraid to ask my crush to a dance for fear of what could happen, a 'group date' to ensure we were both safe. I'm a sixteen year old girl who's been called a faggot, a mistake, and someone in need of mental help just because I love someone. I've walked on a tightrope to appease those around me, and only now have I found that I'm the only one who could get hurt.

Harvey Milk was 'out' in a time when people wondered if "straight society need[ed] to be protected against an infectious disease" ("Out of"). Nevertheless, he pressed back and did something no one thought could ever happen. He was elected to office; he fought for minorities, and he died being entirely honest about who he was. Because Harvey Milk had the moral courage to be who he was in front of the nation, I decided to find some courage for myself. I'm an asexual homoromantic and proud.

Bibliography

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