

First Place Winner
Division I – 7-9th Grades
The Statement of Silence
by Miranda D.
Holy Family Catholic School, Grand Junction, CO

On November 12, 2017 one 23-year-old girl finally spoke the words that 200 women had been struggling to say for more than two decades. Without this young girl, women all over would still be silenced, and they would still be holding something very terrible inside of them. Aly Raisman spoke the truth at such a level that no one could ignore it anymore.

Aly Raisman was 23 years old when she announced that she had been sexually abused by the renowned Olympic doctor, Larry Nassar. She took on an enormous responsibility, for she had just become the face of all sexual abuse victims within competitive sports. Raisman gracefully accepted numerous television interviews and agreed to talk openly on the subject of her abuse. Aly Raisman's story was influential because she is known as one of the most decorated Olympic gymnasts, and she competed in the Olympic games twice. By telling her story to the world, the full extent of her abuse began to be revealed. Her announcement began as a stream trickling slowly but picked up speed and energy as her one voice empowered hundreds of women and athletes to admit that the same had happened to them. Aly wrote a book called *Fierce* sharing personal stories about her life and her abuse. This book empowered many other girls to share their stories as well. Nassar's abuse began in 1997, and every girl's voice was ignored for twenty years.

On January 19, 2018 Aly Raisman and over 160 other victims entered court in Lansing, Michigan. Raisman gave an incredible and inspiring speech. She proved to the world that women were extremely powerful, saying the words, "We are here, we have our voices, and we are not going anywhere." It took Raisman's influence and three weeks of trials, but finally Larry Nassar was sentenced to 175 years in prison. Later in the year, Aly Raisman and her 'sister survivors' were awarded the Arthur Ashe Courage Award. This award is given to athletes who have shown remarkable mental strength not only in their sport, but in their life. The words of her extraordinary speech will be remembered forever. She concluded it by saying, "We may suffer alone, but we survive together." Aly Raisman took one daring step that caused an event that can never be erased.

I feel a connection between Aly Raisman and myself, because we are both gymnasts and people that make goals and are determined about achieving them. We are people who will focus our lives around this goal. Similar to Aly, I am a hard-working passionate gymnast, and I know what it feels like to want something a lot. I have a hard time asking myself: If something got in the way of my goal, would I stop to fix it? Aly Raisman risked everything to fix her problem. She spoke out even though she knew her gymnastics career was on the line. Aly showed me that I must risk what I enjoy for what is right. Aly Raisman is such an inspiring person to me because she spoke out against the pressure of society and the world around her. In my life, it feels as if everyone thinks I must keep quiet and simply accept my troubles. I have the choice to live with it or to speak up. Aly showed me that I can't just glide with everyone else, because more often than not, everyone else is heading the wrong direction.

I have noticed my community throws around many little jokes that 'don't mean a thing.' These jokes range from gender to race and even to mental health issues. They say words such as, "What are

you, dyslexic?” or “You run like a girl.” Trying to blend in, I have said those words myself. Even though they are seemingly harmless, they can affect people in a very negative way. Motivated by Aly, I will stop trying to hide in the crowd, and I will tell the people around me that it is not okay. There was an occasion when my sister and I were at a family party with teenagers that were older than us and they were saying words like this. I felt the need to speak up about it, but I didn’t. When I glanced at my sister, I could tell she felt the same way about it, too. Neither of us said a word, and I regret it. I know that if Aly Raisman had been there, she would have spoken out immediately and started a change. If I could go back in that situation, I would have told them how I felt and maybe they would have realized that it was wrong. The next time I feel that something is wrong I will speak up the way Aly Raisman did.

Speaking out against the crowd is one of the most challenging things to do in life. Our culture has an unwritten set of rules that everyone must follow. I’m certain that Aly Raisman felt many unwritten rules in the gymnastics culture, too. She could feel that medals and winning were the top priority, and mental health was not important. Every day, I feel the rules of society: dress with the trends and talk like everyone else. I will confront these rules and help my friends and classmates realize that these rules need to be changed. I can put up with being the strange one if I am standing up against the unspoken laws. I was born with a voice, and from now on, I will use it. Our world is hushed and quieted, but we only need one person. We only need one more person like Aly Raisman. We only need one person to utter the statement in silence. That person will begin with me.

Bibliography

“Aly Raisman Biography”. Biography.com. A&E Television Networks, LLC, 19 July 2018. 30 Jan. 2019.

“Full Text of Aly Raisman’s Statement”. The New York Times. The New York Times Company, 20 Jan. 2018. 31 Jan. 2019. Print.

Raisman, Aly with Blythe Lawrence. Fierce: How Competing For Myself Changed Everything. New York City: Little Brown and Company, 2017. Print.

