

Second Place Winner
Division II– 10-12th Grades
Offering a Hand to a Stranger
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Tabatha Coffey once said, “Sometimes, in order to follow our moral compass and/or our hearts, we have to make unpopular decisions or stand up for what we believe in.” Many humans can fit under the criteria of this quotation; Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Cesar Chavez, Owl Woman, as well as a long list of many more who don’t see the spotlight as much. One of these names would be Alice Nkom, an individual who has defended the LGBTQ community since the early 1970s.

Throughout history, the way people saw homosexuality was in a cynical light. To illustrate, in the 1800s, homosexuality was considered a disease/psychological condition, the World Health Organization had even called it a mental disorder until it was removed from the list in 1981. Along with this is the fact that male homosexuality had been illegal in Britain until 1967, where then LGBTQ+ rights had started to make slow progress in the world. Similarly, the American people had begun to protest during this period as well, associating themselves with the homophile organizations. What they were fighting against was the criminalization of liking someone of the same gender, examples including that homosexuals were constantly being harassed, mistreated, and arrested for no other reason than their sexuality. Often when we think of rights, we think of honor and impartiality, and when looking at these distressing times we want to offer our support to these people who are hated for simply existing. This is exactly what Alice Nkom did, a famous French-speaking Cameroon lawyer who fought against the criminalization of sexual orientation.

Cameroon and the United States are completely different places with their own set of cultures and traditions- the African country is quite known for its geographical and cultural diversity. However, that doesn’t change the fact that the entire world had seen same-gendered love as a problem. During the 1960s, Cameroon had been experimenting with its territory, having been consisting of a previous French and British leadership, and when control had separated, the land also physically divided to become the two countries of Cameroon and Nigeria. These changes showcase that the area Nkom grew up in was not one that supported the same ideas- British influence playing a large role in society. The government also was experimenting with the limitations of their newfound republic, so whatever the people deemed as fit for the society was what had been enforced, meaning LGBT rights would be suppressed because of everyone’s previous conceptions about the issue they had lived their whole lives with. The fact that Alice Nkom had worked in defending people accused of homosexuality goes to show her resistance to misrepresented ideas of individuals.

Now, the question is whether Alice Nkom is a good representation of moral courage. Breaking it down simply, moral courage is a stubborn opinion one believes in, defending their

ideas with a variety of actions. Yet, moral courage is different from person to person, because morals are the concept of what is right and wrong. A person could believe that murder can be justified against another murderer, while another could believe justice is served through a punishment instead- the opinions can be completely disparate from each other. Nevertheless, from Nkom's position, she believed that a male liking a male was okay, and she fought for them because the world wasn't on the same page. She could act upon her opinions and beliefs and showed me my definition of moral courage; the sheer willingness to fight for something you truly believe is right, benefitting a group of people who are oppressed, unequal, and/or misrepresented.

One of the things that learning about Alice Nkom has offered me is a new insight into the people around me, expressing a more open view of the world. I've always been a silent advocate, hiding behind a screen avoiding confrontation on an issue I feel deeply about, simply because I am afraid of backlash. I'm never too sure where I can put myself in the conversation considering I'm an outsider from certain issues. However, Nkom was an outsider, not being a part of the LGBTQ+ community, but still, she was a supporter. As a very non-social person myself, Nkom is a very inspirational figure because she alone doesn't have to fight for these people, yet she still chooses to. In contrast, I feel like there are many moments in my life where I could've put myself, but instead, I passed as a bystander. There was one time when I was in middle school when I remember seeing someone trip somebody else in the empty hallways, and when the victim fell the other guy had gone into hiding while laughing to himself. I couldn't tell whether it was some kind of joke, but even if they had been friends playing with each other, I fear that there was something else I could've done to show some support- whether it was needed or not. When in comparison to other issues, the event doesn't feel like a big deal, but I feel as if that was my only chance to have stood for something instead of shying away from people simply because I do not know them. I learned to take Nkom's lesson in my life because she is teaching that a problem doesn't have to be yours in order to fix it as well as to explore new things, we may have been wary about because of the labels attached to them. I need to stop holding expectations for myself and the things around me and make an effort, whether it's fighting injustice in real life or just offering a hand to a stranger.