

First Place Winner
Division II– 10-12th Grades
A Heart of Stone
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“History isn't something you look back at and say it was inevitable. It happens because people make decisions that are sometimes very impulsive and of the moment, but those moments are cumulative realities.” - Marsha P. Johnson

Sparked by a violent police raid of the Stonewall Inn, a bar which catered to members of the LGBTQ community, the Stonewall uprising of 1969 paved the way for LGBTQ civil rights activism. At the front of the Stonewall movement stood Marsha P. Johnson, born Malcolm Michaels, Jr., who encapsulated tenacity and rectitude, and who’s legacy continues to inspire marginalized groups throughout society.

As a homeless, trans woman of color who entered the sex-working industry to make ends meet, Marsha P. Johnson epitomized a stigmatized member of the late twentieth century. Growing up, Marsha felt separated and ostracized from society, and she fell deeper into a pool of discrimination as she began to explore and embrace her femininity. Shortly after joining a drag group on Christopher Street, Marsha added the “P” to her name, meaning “Pay It No Mind” (“Life Story”). Despite the discrimination she endured, Marsha P. Johnson stuck to this mantra and spent much of her time helping homeless, marginalized youth. Her profound sense of selflessness earned Marsha the nickname “drag mother” (“About”). Marsha truly lived up to this nickname after taking young Sylvia Rivera, an eleven-year-old trans girl, under her wing (“Life Story”). Although she experienced a life of criticism and inequity, Marsha never failed to uphold her self-proclaimed ideals. Many believe that Marsha’s valor sprouted from her later engagement in the Stonewall protest; however, it was her fervent acts of modest support that would grab at the hearts of her surrounding community. From guiding homeless youth through New York streets to teaching a young trans girl to apply makeup, Marsha spread light through the world one act at a time.

Marsha’s sincere kindness and steadfast attitude eventually embossed her into United States history. When she found herself outside the Stonewall Inn on June 28, 1969 as police raided the institution, Marsha instantly took action. Despite her own vulnerability, Marsha led vehement protests alongside her trans sisters in retaliation to the oppression and violence towards the LGBTQ community. The Stonewall riots hold great significance within LGBTQ history, but they were merely the catalyst for a greater movement. Cofounding the Gay Liberation Front, leading rallies and sit-ins, and encouraging protests through media, Marsha spread her ideals throughout the country. Alongside Sylvia Rivera, Johnson formed the Street Transvestite Activist Revolutionaries (STAR), a response to her frustration surrounding the absence of trans-safe spaces and diminishing representation of racial minorities within the Gay Liberation Front. Through the STAR program, Marsha and Sylvia established and maintained safe houses where trans youth could seek shelter, food, and companionship (“Life Story”). Time and time again, Marsha upheld her moral principles as she fought for change within society. Marsha petitioned for awareness and change on all social scales, and she never settled for “good-enough.” She could have stepped down and accepted the discrimination and destitution that weighed down her youth; instead, Marsha found a livelihood and purpose. She could have stepped down and submitted to the force of the corrupt justice system; instead,

Marsha led the greatest rebellion in LGBTQ history. She could have stepped down and settled for a night of insurgence; instead, Marsha created a nation-wide unitary front. She could have stepped down and surrendered to the trend of cisgendered, white control; instead, Marsha took means into her own hands and fought for the representation of the most stigmatized and unaccepted groups. No matter the injustice, Marsha devoted her life to upholding her convictions and improving the world around her.

In spite of the discriminatory vitriol and egregious actions that targeted her, Marsha P. Johnson embraced her identity, stood against social regulations, and upheld her moral standards. As a young member of the LGBTQ community within United States society myself, Marsha acts as a personal paragon of my own aspirations and virtues. Regardless of the systemic enmity towards my LGBTQ identification, I strive to uphold Marsha's outlook and "pay it no mind." Marsha's non-partial attitude towards injustice and willingness to employ aid on any scale epitomizes my personal mantra: start by pushing pebbles, and you will eventually move a mountain. By embracing any small act of kindness, or any small amount of assistance, anyone can leave a lasting impression and make a difference in the world around them. Following this standard has encouraged me to pursue acts of kindness and encouragement -- delivering compliments or motivations, placing pennies head's side up on walkways, or volunteering around my community -- in hopes of brightening someone's day and improving our society one act at a time. In my sophomore and junior years of high school, I used this mindset to establish a larger, communal goal: I organized and led a project where students collected donated necessities and then distributed them to homeless individuals in and around our community. To recognize the value in others and how to place it above themselves while simultaneously providing assistance to a group in need was the overall goal of the project. Because of her valiant desire for societal rectification, Marsha never shied away from a challenge nor submitted to pressure, and her legacy emboldens the same tenacity within me. Despite any adversity or setback I may face, my goal is to always face challenges head-on, never fall victim to the pressures placed upon me, keep an open and observant mind, and always hold true to my own ideologies.

Marsha P. Johnson's resolve, diligence, and rejection to social conformity accentuates her as an exemplary historical figurehead. While many would choose to sit-down or stand back in the face of adversity, Marsha chose to stand against oppression and lend a hand to those in need. Through her actions, Marsha encouraged generations of people to grasp the importance of their cumulative realities and use these moments to pave the way for change and acceptance.