

**Second Place Winner
Division I– 7-9th Grades**

Screaming in Silence

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“It's more of like, I don't know...a lingering shadow that follows you wherever you go, it may not be visible all the time, but it is still there, in the background, lurking.” (Foster and O'Neal). These are the words of professional basketball player Imani McGee-Stafford that set ground for thousands of other voices. From ages 8-12, she was sexually abused by a family member and was crying for help, screaming for help but the only thing that came out was the silenced pain. McGee-Stafford was 10 years old when she attempted to commit suicide, which was followed by two other attempts later in life. She was in a fight for her life feeling worthless and like she didn't belong anywhere. From this point forward, McGee-Stafford struggled with her mental health which affected her life and career as a professional athlete. Imani McGee-Stafford is a compelling, courageous young woman who suffered more than one can imagine as she found herself in a vulnerable situation that made her question her life. However, instead of marinating in all this pain, she broke the stigma surrounding mental health and had the courage to speak up, raise awareness and use her agony as fuel to help other people who have suffered abuse.

Imani McGee-Stafford felt fear and faced adversity being an athlete and having her basketball career on the line, but she still found the courage to speak up. She is now a 27-year-old woman playing for the Chicago Sky and is speaking more openly about her abuse and clinical depression. By doing this, she helped thousands of women and realized that her situation was not that much different. She showed that you don't have to be silent with the struggles you face. Facing racial discrimination as an African American woman in our society was already hard enough for McGee-Stafford but imagine having to carry the trauma of her childhood on top of that. As a young female, I have experienced discrimination and have witnessed abuse. Although my encounters with discrimination and abuse have not been nearly as bad as what McGee-Stafford has faced, I have witnessed many unkind comments that have affected people more than one may think. Speaking more openly about this topic allowed McGee-Stafford to heal in a sense and influence other people to have a switched mindset of “if she can do it, so can I.”

Speaking up is something everybody may struggle with on a daily basis, whether you see someone getting bullied, or even if *you* need help. A time I wish I showed more moral courage was when I witnessed a case of domestic violence. I was walking with my family through a parking lot after a long day of skiing and came upon a man screaming at a woman. The situation escalated very quickly. He was calling her horrendous appalling names and acting aggressively. The lady just kept walking with a very somber, placid look on her face giving the impression that this situation had happened before. I watched in fear and disgust as he continued to yell at her

with foul language and then slammed his snowboard on a nearby car. He then threw his snowboard at her, barely missing her and stormed off in vexation.

This situation made me physically ill. I was so disgusted and fearful that someone could treat a person so terribly. I wanted to do something. In my heart I wanted to say something, but I was too scared and couldn't bring myself to intervene. I had no words. I asked the lady if she was okay, and she dimly replied yes but the response was concealed and not genuine. Although I made an effort to ask if she was okay, I should have done more, such as calling the police. I will never know the entire story, but this shows how manipulative toxic relationships can be and how it is important to have good people and relationships in your life. Nobody talks about it and brings it to the spotlight of what to do in these situations. If McGee-Stafford witnessed this horrendous scene, I believe she would have had the courage to speak up even if that meant more conflict.

To me, moral courage doesn't always have to be a substantial action such as creating a speech like Martin Luther King Jr. did that over 250,000 people attended. It can be small and simple such as taking action for what you think is right, without benefiting yourself. Helping someone else or a community of people even though you may face consequences and people may not agree, being authentic and brave takes a risk with careful thought. After McGee-Stafford spoke about her trauma she received thousands of emails from people thanking her and sharing *their* stories with her. She is now a spokesperson at Sparks of Hope, a foundation where people speak to children about abuse and the importance of relationships,

McGee-Stafford's actions have impacted me because speaking up is something that I struggle with. McGee-Stafford is an athlete, as am I, and it is something I am very passionate about. To an extent, I can relate to her because in my lifetime I have been exposed to individuals with mental illnesses. In contrast to McGee-Stafford, I usually stay on the downlow, follow the trends and dress like everybody else. Speaking up and being different is a great challenge but you only need one person to spark bravery for it to spread like a wildfire. McGee Stafford, a 6-foot 7 African American woman with tattoos and a shaved head will always be an inspiration to me. Although I know I will never be a boisterous extrovert, I know that by one act *I* can make a difference, I know that I can use my voice to stand up for what I believe in. I know that it only takes one person.