



SECOND PLACE RECIPIENT

The Cost of Silence

Helen Fang

TROY HIGH SCHOOL

In elementary school, I was known as the good student with the inaudible class presentations, and as my shyness grew, so did my parents' concern. My mom enrolled me in a local Speech and Debate program as a last-ditch effort to boost my public speaking skills. Since then, Speech and Debate has not only allowed me to find my voice but speak for the voiceless. While fourth grade me knew that words could be both used or abused, I did not understand the true cost of silence until it forced me to weigh my morals.

This past March, I attended the Speech and Debate qualifiers for my district. Advancing to the top three in finals would ensure qualification to nationals in June. After missing the district tournament last year due to administrative issues, I arrived at the competition with fiery determination. I advanced from the preliminary rounds to the semi-finals, and suddenly, I was only one step away from my goal. Bouncing my knees with barely restrained nerves, I stared intently at the door, anticipating the arrival of our third and final judge. Suddenly, I felt the nervous energy in my legs curdle into a sickening dread in my stomach. The person who walked into the room was a family friend from my Speech and Debate program. This was a major issue because judges are supposed to be impartial strangers. I knew that whatever ranking she gave would be inevitably biased because of her personal connection to me. This mistake had managed to slip through because the two of us were registered under different schools.

When I locked eyes with her, she nonchalantly glanced away. At that moment, I knew that I would have to be the one to speak up. For one second,

an image of me triumphantly holding the first place trophy flashed through my mind. Staying silent would almost guarantee my advancement into finals. However, the selfish thought deflated just as quickly as it had been conjured. Winning on the basis of a biased round would not be winning at all. In fact, it would be a loss to my character. As the dread in my stomach transformed into resolve, I announced that there had been a judging mistake. Gasps of surprise filled the room as the other two judges immediately contacted tournament officials to find a replacement judge. A weight I did not know I carried was suddenly lifted from my shoulders as I breathed my own sigh of relief. To my surprise, a few of my competitors thanked me for ensuring a fair round. I realized then that my decision not only impacted my self-perception but the outcomes for my fellow public speakers.

Although I did not make it to finals, I went home that day with a sense of pride in myself, for choosing the true win. In this personal test of character, I had emerged victorious by choosing to speak the truth instead of remaining silent.