



FOURTH PLACE RECIPIENT

# “Sit Up” For Integrity

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In seventh grade, physical education (P.E.) was my least favorite subject. We ran too much, we played sports that did not interest me, and there was fitness testing. Fitness testing was, in my opinion, useless and boring, like the rest of P.E. However, it taught me a lesson that I might otherwise have learned too late.

At my former school, seventh-grade girls must do thirty-seven sit-ups within a minute, and eighth-grade girls have to do forty-one sit-ups. Our teachers would pair us together to hold each other's feet down and count the number of sit-ups completed. I was partnered with an eighth-grader who had never reached the required number of sit-ups. She asked me if I could lie and tell the teacher that she had completed forty-one sit-ups, and I gave a noncommittal grunt, which she took to mean yes. At the end of the minute, she had completed only forty sit-ups. As our teacher (who would later become my eighth-grade teacher) walked past each pair, recording their score, my partner cast me a stare which plainly read, “You better not chicken out.” The teacher finally reached us. “Emma, how many sit-ups did your partner get?” he asked. It would be so easy to lie—surely nobody would notice if I tacked on an extra sit-up. I took a deep breath, steeling myself for what I was about to do. “Forty,” I said. The eighth-grader was indignant, and she made me pay. She decreased my score in retaliation. However, the lesson I learned was much more important than any P.E. grade.

That split-second decision that I made in a seventh-grade P.E. class taught me something that I am glad I learned sooner rather than later.

I learned that when you tell the truth, you uphold others' trust. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once said, “I'm not upset that you lied to me, I'm upset that from now on I can't believe you.” In the second that I was making up my mind about what I should say, my upcoming eighth-grade year flashed before my eyes. I imagined walking through the doors on my first day of eighth grade labeled as a cheater. If I had lied, and the teachers found out, how would they feel if they learned that they could no longer believe me? How would I feel if my reputation of honesty was no more? At that moment, I realized that integrity lasts forever and is more important than one semester's P.E. grade.

Looking back two years from then, I realize that an A minus in P.E. was well worth the lesson I learned, a lesson that was not included in the syllabus and cannot be measured with good grades. I learned that even if nobody else notices whether I choose to tell lies or speak the truth, I know deep down what the ethical thing to do is, and I will feel better about myself for doing it.