



FIRST PLACE RECIPIENT

# To Speak Up or Not to Speak Up

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Growing up, I was always a reserved, quiet kid and I never had many friends. Fitting in was always difficult for me. I was always busy comparing myself to others and worrying about what everyone else thought. Finally during my sophomore year in high school, I came out of my shell, and I started to feel like I fit in. It was something I had always wanted, to be part of a group and find my people. And I had found my people, or so I thought. I really believed I was in a good place until I was faced with a situation that tested my ethical and moral code.

On a Friday night after our high school football game, my friends and I were walking through the neighborhood. We were messing around and having a good time, like we had many nights. I always looked forward to hanging out with my friends, but strangely, I still had this underlying feeling that something was missing and I would soon find out why. After about thirty minutes, a kid walked by. I didn't know him personally, but I knew he went to our high school. He was a short, skinny kid, just like I had been most of my life. In fact, he reminded me of myself. My friends immediately started making fun of him because of his small stature. At first I tried to ignore it, but as it continued I saw the look of embarrassment and helplessness in the kid's eyes and I couldn't take it anymore. I tried to get my friends to stop

bothering him, but the more I tried, the more they ignored me and kept antagonizing him. The kid kept trying to change direction to avoid them, but they were relentless.

At that moment, I realized, I had a choice- stay quiet and keep my place in the group or stand up for the kid and lose the group of friends I had worked so hard to be a part of. It wasn't easy, but I knew what I had to do. I decided to stick up for the kid, and despite the pushback, I finally got my friends to walk away. I ended up staying back with the kid being bullied and I couldn't be happier with my decision.

I learned a lot about myself that night. I learned what type of person I wanted to be and what kind of people I wanted to surround myself with. Shortly after that night, I quit hanging out with those kids. Not only did I stand up for that kid, but I stood up for myself and the kind of person I wanted to be. The kid being bullied ended up being one of my closest friends. Since then, I've found friends that I'm proud to be with and who share my same ethical and moral compass. Most importantly, I no longer feel like something is missing.