

The mall buzzed with life that day, but for me, everything slowed down the moment I saw it: a crisp \$100 bill fluttering to the ground. It slipped unnoticed from the wallet of the elderly man in front of me as he struggled to pay for his purchases. My heart raced. That \$100 could change everything. I was just a hundred dollars short of buying my ticket to see Coldplay live coming up in Las Vegas—a dream that I’d been working toward for weeks at the snack bar. Four more shifts of flipping hot dogs and making slushies stood between me and that ticket. Four shifts I didn’t have time for.

No one else noticed. No cameras. No witnesses. Just me, the money, and a choice. I bent down, picked up the bill, and looked at the man. *Hadn’t I worked hard enough already? Didn’t I deserve this break after all those late evenings and sticky counters?* The questions lingered for a moment, tempting me. But then I heard my mom’s voice in my head: “*Who you are when no one’s watching—that’s your true self.*”

I tapped the man’s shoulder and said, “Sir, I think you dropped this.” His eyes filled with gratitude as he took it from my hand. “That’s for my granddaughter’s birthday,” he said, his voice soft and sincere.

I walked out of the store with empty hands, but a full heart.

I was raised to believe that doing the right thing matters, especially when it’s inconvenient. Ethics weren’t just talked about in my house—they were lived. My parents showed me that honesty, fairness, and responsibility aren’t optional; they’re essential. And the older I get, the more I see why.

Ethics are the foundation of trust—something the world needs more of. Whether it’s a person, a business, or an organization, people should feel confident that they’ll be treated fairly and honestly. That trust is built through choices like the one I made at the mall. Every act of integrity, no matter how small, strengthens the invisible contract we all rely on.

I think back to that moment often—not because of what I gave up, but because of what I gained. I will finish high school in the next two years, and I’m driven by the same principle. From science class to group leadership to job shifts, I hold myself to doing what’s right, even when it’s tough. I earned the money the hard way and bought my ticket a few weeks later. But going to the concert isn’t the highlight. The real win was knowing I stayed true to who I am, knowing my commitment to integrity will guide me wherever I go.

That \$100 could’ve bought a ticket—but I walked away with something no one can take from me: self-respect.