



APOORVA VALLAMPATI

is a ninth grade honor student at Twinsburg High School. She is an active member of the THS student council and plays on the tennis team at school. Apoorva plays the alto saxophone and piano and studies BHARATANATYAM, an ancient Indian classical dance. She hopes to be an attorney one day.

I am blessed. I live amongst loving, supportive and broad-minded, at least from a 14-year old's perspective, set of family and friends. Albeit despite the mild anxiety that every 9th grader suffers from, school is a happy place for me. Violence, poverty, discrimination, hunger, starvation and such, put a grinding knot in my guts, but personal experiences don't come to mind when I think of or discuss 'hate' and 'discrimination'. Ironically, my middle school years exposed me to a phenomenon that does not cut and make you bleed, but one that leaves deep scars in its wake.

It was the first period of the day. Class was in session. Shana*, my peers and I were engrossed in the day's lesson: Holocaust. Group discussions were loud, but some subtle yet negative comments by our teacher with regards to Jews did not go unnoticed. His gaze lingered on Shana for longer than a few seconds each time. Shana was noticeably uncomfortable. The rest of the class was a little surprised, I was perplexed, and Shana was utterly shaken and disgusted. Stronger insults followed, but Mr. Z* seemed to think that he was being funny.

I turned around and looked at Shana, a faithful follower of Judaism. What happened next was most compelling... one look at my friend's face, and I felt as though my emotions mirrored hers. The anxiety on her face became my anxiety. The pain she was so evidently feeling became my pain. The tears welling up in her eyes became my tears. It was like we were on a slow, emotionally-draining roller-coaster together. This reflection of emotions happened for two reasons: our strong relationship as best friends, and my sheer intolerance for discrimination, whether it be due to gender, race, religion, or sexuality. Seeing my best friend being discriminated against hurt me more than being discriminated against, myself. What was most shocking and hurtful was that such discrimination came from a teacher, whose duty and moral responsibility it is to protect his/her students, especially from prejudice and hate in an environment that is created to be safe, enriching and comfortable.

Days passed and he continued. Though I could not help Shana much beyond accompanying her to the counselor a few times and being there for her, I was inspired. I knew this deep-seated hate had to be stopped.

That day forward, I was a changed person. Though I alone may not be able to straighten out the many wrinkles that discrimination has left on the human landscape, I strongly believe that my efforts to advocate inclusion, and actively spread awareness, kindness, and tolerance will have a domino effect as time passes. As a young adult member of an organization that is built on the foundation of truth, right action, peace, love and non-violence, I consciously engage with people in the community, young, adult and experienced, with the hope that when people are faced with a choice, they'll remember the tolerance and benevolence I showed them and follow my example.

**Names have been changed*