

LAURA MILSTEIN is a tenth grader at Brush High School.

She plays on the soccer team, is active in several school clubs and also plays the flute. Laura's favorite class is English, but she hasn't decided yet what she wants to do in the future.

A new year of school had started, bringing its usual cast of strange and unique new students. I had been hearing the rumors all day- "Have you seen the new girl? She's huge!" This piqued my interest, and in the final period of the day I got to see what all the commotion was about. Late to class, a morbidly obese girl of over two hundred pounds lumbered in with no explanation. With her came a flurry of whispers and giggles, some not so quiet. She proceeded to sit heavily in the nearest seat, and stare at the board with a stoic expression. I was torn, part of me was disgusted by her weight like the rest of my peers, but I also was impressed by her lack of emotion and ashamed that the class could be so rude to her face.

As the first week of school went by, the gossip didn't cease. If anything it became more hateful, as she was the subject of numerous malicious jokes. I didn't stand up for her, and started offering myself excuses- I didn't know her personally, it wasn't my problem, I wasn't the actual one being cruel. Yet my conscious still gnawed at me, because deep down I knew that no one should be subject to such insults, but I put it to the back of my mind. The first weekend passed in a blur, and upon returning to school we were shocked to find her gone, transferred to another local district.

This was the point where I recognized my giant mistake- silence. As she was tormented, what did I do? Try to justify it to myself with excuses that even I could tell were pathetically inadequate? It didn't matter if this girl had inherited the problem from similarly obese parents or just liked to eat, I could tell it was wrong. As Confucius said, "To know what is right and not to do it is the worst cowardice." I felt guilty and was far from proud of my apathetic behavior, and resolved that I would strive to change my attitude. Prejudice can take many forms, some less obvious than race and ethnicity. But discrimination on account of weight is no less important, or, to the victim, hurtful.

So when my peers ridiculed a classmate on account of anything that made them different, I began to take a stand. Even something as simple as, "They can't control that," or "Why don't you get to know them first?" could quiet a persecutor. I promised myself I would never again be the one to look at the ground while intolerance was being vocalized. In the words of Gandhi, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." I challenge others to take this quote into consideration, and simply object to any acts of discrimination in everyday life. Because to truly "stop the hate," we must first learn to put an end to the indifference within ourselves.