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“Like Wildfire”

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” I can’t think of a time more challenging and controversial than 2020. While a pandemic tore apart families, isolated individuals, and stole chances of saying goodbye to those we have lost to this invisible monster, Americans fought both one another and the threat of civil war. However, this nation remains a union. It does so through integrity in mind, in spirit, in body, for we stand united behind the fact that COVID-19 has hurt us all and “united we stand, divided we fall.” (Aesop). In spite of our successes, we must not forget that there is still disunion. There is still pain. There is still friction. In order to remain whole in these times of trouble, America must remember that it is integrity, wholeness of oneself and the community, that keep the world from tearing at the seams

There are count less individuals who worked in countless ways to keep our country together during the pandemic. Some of those closest to me have been my biggest inspiration, as well as the victims of my greatest fears, during this crisis. My mother and father both work in the medical field. Over the last year, they have attended meetings, faced the threat of serious illness, and worked despite lower than average pay. My dad took the Lead Physician position at American Health Network, saw possible COVID-positive patients in full personal protective equipment, accepted COVID-19 vaccinations to prove that it was safe for others, and continuously took on more responsibilities to keep the community together. Meanwhile, my mom worked at the senior center in Muncie where she helped organize a rummage sale, manage a shop, and decorate the building. During this pandemic, many people have avoided seniors in order to not infect them with this deadly virus, but it is also important to not forget the fact that they are still an integral part of community and need human contact as much as anyone else. My mom helped to accomplish this over the many hours and days of work she has put into the senior center and Muncie Action Plan.

Other people in my family have also shown integrity, though in more common ways. I am proud of my brother, Cameron, for his determination to continue as a normal twelve-year-old boy during this troublesome last year. He has played basketball and participated in robotics club, often going to multiple games per week and having to be prepared for them to be canceled at the last minute. Cameron stayed true to himself with his wants and needs in a very simple way. He inspired me, and I’m sure he encouraged other with his determination. On the other hand, I spent my spring months of quarantine and summer break trying to discover myself. When faced with anxiety and depression, in the worst years I turned to fishing, exercising, walking outside, gardening, gaming, reading, and publishing two new books in the span of two weeks. I must say that after returning to school, my anxiety and depression have lessened, and I find myself valuing the company of my classmates more than I

ever have before. My months of self-reflection have taught me not to jump into arguments, prove my “intelligence” by putting others down, and to grow in becoming a mediator in arguments. It is a daily struggle, but I believe this crisis helped to improve my integrity by making me be true to my positive self and spreading the knowledge of integrity to others.

Lastly, teachers deserve the greatest thanks for showing integrity throughout this pandemic. It would have been easy for teachers to settle back during virtual learning last spring, to pull worksheets, projects, and tests from an outline, to forget about the students’ lives except for their names on a screen. That was not the case with my magnificent teachers at Wes-Del. While students remained isolated, teachers reached out, constantly asking if we were doing well, if our families were healthy, and if there was anything they could do. Families of students put together their own prom, and yearbook staff still included the last semester in the eternal pages of memories. Throughout the last year, there is one person who has especially stood out with her integrity (although she always does). In April of 2020, Mrs. Meier-Fisher edited a 500+ page book of mine and then a second 100+ page poem collection about a week after, as well as graded research papers for another class. Throughout the last few months of 2020 and the beginning of 2021, she edited my two most recent books amid the flurry of assignments to grade from other classes. Mrs. Meier-Fisher truly is a woman of integrity, and she is a symbol of those in the Gaston community and beyond. She proves that distance does not mean less effort.

Unity is the force that opposes crises. Albert Einstein said, “Whoever is careless with the truth in small matters cannot be trusted in important affairs.” In order for a community to survive a crisis, it begins with integrity within oneself, then with siblings, parents, teachers, employers, and beyond. It is a ring of concentric circles, all rippling out from one person, the individual. To inspire another person, it can be as simple as playing basketball going to work in spite of difficulties, or supporting a peer or student in his or her aspirations. It is through encouraging others in our own actions that we prove that we have integrity, and at the same time persuade others to do the same, therefore spreading goodness like a wildfire.

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