
Student Essay: The Power of Stories to Inspire Strong Leaders

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Maya S. is a Muslim, Egyptian and student athlete who has lived in Saudi Arabia for most of her life. She is 16 and a junior at the American International School of Riyadh, where she is enrolled in the International Baccalaureate program.

In this Student Essay of the Week, Maya talks about how building a platform for others to share their stories has helped her understand why welcoming diversity of thought and experience will make her a stronger, more empathetic leader.

Three steps forward and two steps back. That was my reality during the privilege walk.

In October 2018, I was selected along with 50 other high school students to attend a leadership trip to a farm outside Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. We believed that we were all going to learn about how to become leaders with strong voices. However, the trip took a completely unexpected and inspiring turn. Instead, we left knowing how to listen first and speak second.

At the farm, we participated in an activity called a privilege walk, where we were asked to step forward or backward in response to certain questions. From the responses, it became obvious that all of us were struggling with something that those around us knew nothing about.

I learned that the girl beside me once wondered where her next meal would come from. The girl beside her was afraid to leave the house at night because she had been assaulted. The boy to my left had been held at gunpoint. And the boy beside him had a mental disorder. This realization hit me hard. I was able to understand that although it's impossible for us all to experience the same things, it is possible for us to try and listen to each other and understand each other's differences. I began to appreciate the meaning of finding beauty in diversity. During that trip I learned that true leaders listen to the voices of others, and as a result they are able to enrich their own points of view.

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During the summer of that year, someone I loved dearly was faced with medical issues, and my family began dealing with a lot of uncertainty. Even when it was all over, I felt lost and changed. I couldn't explain it, but I wished that someone understood. I then began thinking of the people standing around me that day in Riyadh during the privilege walk, and everyone around the world like us. Did we all feel the same desire to be understood? How could we all feel seen and valued, regardless of our stories? I wanted to hear more about the stories of all those kids I met that day in line. I wanted to understand how we all ended up there, despite our different paths. I wanted to create something that would allow them to express their stories.

That summer, I started [Voice of Change](#), a weblog that allows other teenagers to contribute writing that reflects the experiences that have shaped them. The first story I received was “Purpose,” from a girl struggling with depression. She wrote, “Purpose: a reason, a given, motivation, a point. We all live life because we have a purpose. We realize that there is a point, we have motivation and a reason to live. We look forward to things and create opportunities for ourselves. We see a future. Imagine living life feeling as though you have no purpose... That means no reason, no motivation, simply no point... the best way to describe this feeling is as if [you're] dead. This feeling is depression.”

After I posted the article, which talked about how depression impacted the author's life, I received comments, emails and texts from others saying that the article communicated what they needed to hear and couldn't put into words. This initial response fueled the rest of my work. I began receiving other stories about challenging experiences, ranging from sexual assault and racial discrimination, to losing a loved one and struggling with body image. Here are a few powerful quotes from these articles:

"I'm not sure who or what I'm living for, but I'd never want to risk my family members feeling as I do right now. It's okay that I'm suffering right now, because I have faith that it will pass, eventually it will." – "Live On"

"I am not ignorant because I'm Arab. I'm not a terrorist because I'm Muslim. I am not a thug because I'm black. I am not who I am because of what you see on the news. I am who I am because of what I've been through, and what I have become." – "Assume"

"Living with anxiety is like feeling alive through the motions of life, but never freely living. It's being aware of my surroundings but lost in another world inside my head." – "I Choose Life"

I see my *Voice of Change* journey as having so much to do with becoming a better leader. It has helped me to see clearly the type of leader I hope to become. I have developed a stronger perspective by understanding the voices and stories of others. I have become more empathetic to other people's struggles, a quality I will need when I run my own business one day. You can't understand your customers' wants or your employees' needs if you don't listen and appreciate where they're coming from. Also, *Voice of Change* has shown me how much our experiences shape us and contribute to how we see the world and solve problems. Each person offers a unique voice and a different perspective – all powerful and important in their own way.