A Testimony on Courage

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Sukhjit (76K)

From the 8th - 13th of July I was lucky enough to be selected as the

Member for Jandakot, my local electorate, in the annual YMCA Youth

Parliament of Western Australia. Here young people come together to

share their views on community issues and develop a piece of youth

legislation. On the last day in Parliament House, we were given the

opportunity to speak on any issue of our choosing. I chose to give a

testimony on courage, drawing on my personal experiences with

accepting the hair on my body and my story of overcoming bullying. I

felt that these issues were important to explore as it gave the

audience a chance to enter my world, feel my emotional and

impassioned story, and take that message of courage with them

Youth Parliament (631K)

What other opportunity would I get as an 18 year old to voice my

opinions/journey/story to 55 Youth Parliamentarians, various West

Australian politicians, special dignitaries and the general public?

It gives me great pleasure to share with you my speech.

"People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when

the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is

revealed only if there is a light from within.

Gorilla Girl.

Today I would like to share with you how these two words ultimately

shifted the paradigm of my high school and my life.

Let us begin with the roots. I am a Sikh, born and raised in

Australia. Sikhism is the fifth largest religion in the world. We are

believers of selfless acts of service (Seva) and stand up for human

rights and equality. Sikhs can be recognised by their unshorn hair,

turbans and beards. Which is why I have never cut my hair in my life.

We believe that there is a practical and spiritual purpose for every

hair on our body, which keeps us in balance. Most importantly, I keep

my hair for identity purposes and the battles in Sikh history it represents.

However, I didn't arrive at this conclusion overnight. We all have

our insecurities and mine was my hairy legs.

Brought up in a secluded home away from 'western influences' and

beauty magazines, I grew up believing that Caucasian girls weren't

born with leg hair! Unaware of the fact that girls actually shaved

their legs. I often questioned: "Why aren't I like everybody else?

Why don't I feel feminine?" And hair removal advertisements

exclaiming that THIS is "what beauty feels like" triggered me to

think... am I not a beautiful girl?

In the school environment, Gorilla Girl was just one of the forms of

verbal abuse I received. I was bullied for four years for not

conforming to the high school hierarchy. Every day the amount of boys

bullying me grew like an epidemic. Furthermore, as Head Girl of the

school, a position of respect, it was highly embarrassing. I cannot

convey to the chamber how humiliated and ashamed I felt to be Sukhjit

Kaur Khalsa.

So I decided to pull a twist to the traditional bullying victim card.

I decided to face all 26 of my bullies, with the support from the

principal, teachers, and my friends, in a safe mediating environment.

I spoke straight from my heart for 45 minutes about the things they

were doing, how they were doing it, where they were doing it,

questioning why they were doing it, how it made me feel, the affect

it had on my studies, my wellbeing and my duties as the Head Girl. I

put them in my shoes, highlighted the link between bullying and

teenage suicides, racism, hate crimes and current world issues, and

finished off with a sincere plea for my bullies to just... stop.

Believe me, I have never felt a room so sacred and silent, never have

I seen that many boys come close to tears, never have I ever seen my

teachers/principal cry from listening to my words, never have I felt

so overwhelmed with emotion and release and NEVER have I experienced

such courage.

I felt as if I wasn't just standing up for myself, I was standing up

for everyone who had ever been bullied in the past. The school was

buzzing. Students were finally addressing bullying in a manner that

had never in my experience been done before. I sent a clear message

to my peers: if it takes 1 girl to stand up to 26 boys, she will.

As a result, I got an unexpected amount of heartfelt apologies from

all of those 26 boys. The day after, the atmosphere changed in the

school corridors. No longer did I feel fear or hate. The nods of

acknowledgement, genuine smiles and friendly hellos from my bullies

made me realise that I had achieved something. I had gone into this

'mission' yearning for respect and came out receiving more than I

could have possibly imagined.

All Sikh girls are given the name Kaur which translates to Lioness or

Princess. After accepting my identity for what it is and staring at

bullying right in the face, I rose above a sea of grey. That is the

day I took my first steps as a Lioness.

My bullies didn't undergo a punishment. Instead, my means of

communication forced them to face their actions, educated them about

my context and gave them a chance to change.

It's time to stand up. It's time to stand up and face our fears. It's

time to stand up and discover the courage we never thought we had.

It's time to stand up to change. To a positive revolution. A

revolution that we as young people can be a part of. If I can do it,

SO CAN YOU!

Now every day when I leave the house, hairy as ever, I command to the

world: Judge Me. I Dare You."

The response I got during and after the speech was phenomenal! There

were plenty of tears from both the audience and myself. And as I took

my seat, I felt overwhelmed as an array of notes flooded my desk from

all corners of the room. Notes exclaiming how inspired my peers were,

calling me a lioness in each one of them. One boy even wrote: "You

truly sparkle within. Be proud of those legs!" Furthermore, the

amount of people that came up to me afterwards wanting to learn more

about Sikhism was truly astonishing! At that moment, I have never

felt prouder to be a Sikh. Most of my audience had never heard of

Sikhism before. And now, not only had they heard of it, they had

understood it in a way that hopefully they will never forget. I truly

thank Waheguru Ji for giving me this opportunity to speak from my

heart and for the strength He gave me to deliver the speech.

Sukhjit Kaur Khalsa