

Committee for Integrity Enhancement

1st Place High School Division

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10th Grade

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Strong Opinions, Strong Integrity

Everyone knows the worn-out, standard definition of integrity, echoed by school children everywhere with as much apathy as they can muster: “Integrity is doing the right thing who no one else is watching.” But I don’t think that mantra, recited so many times that its meaning has become empty, is entirely true. Yes, integrity does involve being a good person when no one else is around to judge one’s actions, but it also encompasses how one acts when *everyone* is watching, especially when expressing opinions. Our integrity can be exhibited through the way we put our opinions into action, how we deal with the opinions of others, and the act of remaining truthful when expressing our opinions.

To me, opinions are nothing if we don’t possess the integrity to follow through with them. You say you think animals should never be euthanized simply because they don’t have a home? Great! I totally agree with you. Oh, you think it’s ridiculous that our school doesn’t have better-tasting, healthier lunches? Me, too! It would be fantastic if our lunches were more nutritious and wholesome. My point is, everyone says things like this all the time. Quite rarely does *anyone* actually do anything to catalyze changes in our society, however. People with strong integrity actually “talk the talk” and “walk the walk.” Integrity is not simply speaking out about our opinions and lofty ideals, but putting those views into action.

Even though putting our views into action is important, respecting the varying opinions of others also hold weight. It would be ludicrous to say that anyone with a different opinion than me is wrong. Part of the reason living in a democracy works is because we all come together and discuss our different opinions. Ideally, it’s how the Senate and the House of Representatives works; by collaborating together, we can work out the best possible arrangement for everyone. Anyone with true integrity understands that whether or not someone thinks ObamaCare is good or bad, everyone’s opinion matters. Sure, our mundane

day to day conflicts may not be as consequential as federal legislation, but they do matter. If my friends and I are in an argument with another group of people over what color t-shirt we want to order for the soccer team, it's only right to listen to what everyone has to say. Even if I think ordering hot pink t-shirts with neon orange print is the stupidest idea they could have possible come up with, I owe it to them as a fellow human being to listen to what they have to say. They may think my idea is even dumber. We may not end up with what we all initially wanted, but everyone's wishes are more likely to be satisfied than if I decided to order the t-shirts exactly how I wanted them without anyone else's opinion. We can only express our opinions in a way that demonstrates integrity when we listen to others.

While listening to opposing opinions, it can become difficult to remain honest if we really want to make a point. When politicians are exposed as corrupt, no one listens to their opinions anymore or believes anything that say to be true. The same goes for people in our lives. I know that when I find out someone has been untruthful, it is so hard to ever believe anything they say. It can escalate so extremely that it becomes difficult to seriously listen to any of their opinions or thoughts. The situation creates a nagging doubt at the back of my mind that urges me to believe that what they are saying isn't true. The doubt only grows when they act even slightly ambiguous. For example, in tennis, we make our own line calls. Clearly, it involves a boatload of integrity; it would be so easy to call balls out just to win a match. When playing doubles, there are two people on each side of the court. This can make the line calls an opinion issue. I may call the ball out, but my partner could think calling gray-area balls out simply because they couldn't get to them in time to return them, but it doesn't matter. One tenet that our coach has instilled in us is that if we aren't sure whether the ball was in or out, always give the opponent the benefit of the doubt. I think this is applicable to everything; even if we do not trust our peers due to past experiences, it shows a lot of integrity to say, "Okay, I believe you."

Every day, we are overwhelmed with so many chances to express our opinion about both critical and trivial issues. We also receive opportunities to listen to the opinions of others and give them second chances to redeem themselves and their opinions even if our gut is telling us not to. These all pertain to integrity; integrity is woven into the fabric of every choice we can make daily. The strength of our opinions in other people's eyes is only as powerful as the strength of our integrity.