

VOICE OF DEMOCRACY CONTEST

FIRST PLACE 2010 NATIONAL WINNER Madison Mullen Ohio

Madison Mullen, a senior at Olentangy Liberty High School has been named the first place winner in the 2010 National Voice of Democracy Program and recipient of the \$30,000 first place VFW T.C. Selman Memorial Scholarship Award provided by the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Madison plans a career in law and she was sponsored by VFW Post 3297 and Ladies Auxiliary in Delaware, Ohio.

“Does America Still Have Heroes?”

by Madison Mullen

On June 25, 2009, the “King of Pop,” Michael Jackson, was pronounced dead at the UCLA Medical Center. Over 31 million Americans watched as he was buried on July 7th. Details explaining how and why Michael Jackson passed away swamped the media for weeks. CNN even named him a “national hero.”

Hmmm. Heroism. When I first read this year’s Voice of Democracy theme, I thought “Does America still have heroes? Of course we do!” As Americans, we’re barraged every single day by the media with news, sound bites, highlights, and commentary on the ‘quote’ “Heroes” of today. Considering the media coverage, lucrative dollars we pay our movie actors, musicians, and athletes, one would have to assume they’re our heroes, right?

Now I have to admit, that was **my** initial reaction. But after turning off the TV, silencing my iPod, logging off of the internet and truly pondering this year’s theme – I’ve reached a different conclusion.

Webster defines a hero as “a person who, in the opinion of others, has distinguishable courage, admiration and has performed a heroic act.” A simple Google search brought up more than 1,000 websites listing similar qualities of a hero. From these sources, I’ve personally adopted the five essential qualities of heroism: service, conviction, selflessness, bravery, and sacrifice – all powerful character traits that capture the true meaning of heroism.

Now, if these are the right qualities, America needs to wake up and seriously re-evaluate who we label as heroes. I’ll give you that Michael Jackson was a multi-talented entertainer, but the media circus following his death made him look like the hero of all heroes. The truth is, he and hundreds of other singers, actors, and athletes simply don’t measure up to these “heroic” standards. Where is the conviction? Where is the selflessness? So, if Michael Jackson, one of the most famous performers of all time, isn’t a true hero, then who is?

First, let’s look in our own communities. I know a local physician who started a non-profit clinic in Honduras to provide free healthcare for the desperately poor. That’s service! Or my friend, a commercial pilot, who left his secure, high-paying pilot position to fly food and necessities into third world countries. That’s selflessness! These men had convictions and made huge sacrifices to make a difference in the lives of others—these men are true heroes.

Now, don’t get me wrong. Heroes can and often do become famous like Neil Armstrong or Martin Luther King, Jr. Their accomplishments are historic and inspire many, but I think that the heroes that touch our hearts and impact us the most are the ones living down the street, working in the cubicle next to you, or in front of you in the drive-thru. We are so blessed to live in a country where anyone can become a hero, where anyone can make a difference, and where anyone can serve their country.

That brings us to our final heroes of today – our U.S. military. We currently have so many American servicemen and women serving around the globe, all in the name of justice and freedom. People are aware of their sacrifice and service, but do we truly appreciate their heroism? Not nearly enough.

So back to the original question: does America still have heroes? My answer remains the same, yes! However, they're not the stars on TV or movies we watch, the true heroes are the people around us who selflessly serve others, make sacrifices with conviction, and even sacrifice their lives – for others.

On that same June 25, 2009 when Michael Jackson passed away, insurgents attacked an outpost in Afghanistan using a small army of explosives. Both Lts. Brian Bradshaw and Aaron Fairbain fought to the very end and gave their lives in service for their country. No headlines, No TV, No web coverage. So despite the crowd at Michael Jackson's funeral days later chanting "thank you Michael," wouldn't it be more appropriate and powerful for all of us to join with Brian and Aaron's family in prayerfully whispering: "Thank you Brian, thank you Aaron." Both their Medal of Honor citations called them fearless, daring, and **heroic**. Yes, America still has Heroes. Thank you.