

VOICE OF DEMOCRACY

FIRST PLACE

2011 NATIONAL WINNER

Kelsey Woo

California

Kelsey Woo, a senior at Harvard-Westlake School has been named the first place winner in the 2011 National Voice of Democracy Program and recipient of the \$30,000 T.C. Selman Memorial Scholarship Award provided by the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Kelsey plans a career in journalism, writing, music, classics, and possibly teaching. She was sponsored by VFW Post 10694 and Ladies Auxiliary in Santa Ana, California.

“Does My Generation Have a Role in America’s Future?”

By Kelsey Woo

It is hot; obscenely hot. Suddenly, Bruce Springsteen’s voice blasts through the crackling heat, singing “Born in the USA.” It wakes the teenage boy. The first thing he sees when he opens his eyes is a picture of his little sister. For a moment, he is back in Nashville, waking up hungry for one of his mom’s famous Sunday breakfasts. Only something isn’t right. Where are those wonderful smells of coffee brewing and hash browns frying? And why is it still dark outside? As his eyes adjust, he remembers: he is not at home in his bed; he is in his barracks in Afghanistan. It is midnight, and his platoon is getting ready for a mission. When he opens his footlocker, a family photo reminds him to email his sister: her interview for West Point is tomorrow. Tennessee seems light years away as the young private spends his days and nights defending our nation. Forty eight hours later, two soldiers knock on the front door of a yellow house in Nashville. When the tall, blonde woman opens the door and sees the uniforms, she crumples to the ground, knowing, before a word is uttered, that her son is dead. This soldier was the boy next door, the boy who delivered your newspapers, the young man who cut your lawn. This fallen soldier proves that my generation is already playing a major role in America’s future. His unselfish sacrifice is a mirror of the best of my generation.

I want to remind everyone, that while I stand before you and deliver this speech; my generation is in Iraq and Afghanistan, boots on the ground, fighting a war that will determine America’s future. The news footage from Afghanistan is the Reality TV show that represents my generation; not Jersey Shore, not the Kardashians. Young Americans are fighting and dying on the battlefield, coming home to be fitted for artificial limbs, in order to defend democracy and our way of life. It is this generation of selfless young men and women that are playing a major role in America’s future. That is why my generation will not allow ourselves to be defined by the media as selfish, spoiled young adults.

Instead, my generation is ensured a role in determining our country’s future because we are defined by men like Corporal Matthew Bradford, who at 19 became a blind, double amputee when a roadside bomb in Iraq detonated. He learned to walk on prosthetic legs and has reenlisted; he is serving at Camp Lejeune where he works with wounded Marines to encourage them in their recovery. We are defined by women like Private Melissa Strock, who at the age of 19 lost both legs while serving in Iraq, when an IED exploded under her Humvee. With both legs severely injured, Private Strock crawled to the burning vehicle and rescued a fellow soldier. That is how my generation secures its role in America’s future, we never give up. We are defined by the courage of an Afghan girl, Bibi Aisha. At 13 she was sold into a forced marriage; when she tried to flee her nose and ears were cut off. She chose to seek justice against the Taliban and show the world her face. Now 18, she has come to America to start a new life. That is how my generation secures its role in America’s future, we never give up.

In every generation there is a defining moment. For our parents, it was the day President Kennedy was assassinated. For our older brothers and sisters, it was 9/11. Many wonder: will there be a defining moment for my generation? Is it yet to come? My answer is simple; it is already here. My generation will forever be defined by how we defeat the terrorists and win the war on terror. That is how my generation secures its role in America's future. We never give up.

It will take all these groups of young adults: from our soldiers fighting on the front lines to college bound young Americans, working in harmony to solidify our role as the foot soldiers, the first line of defense for America's future. And so, I offer the following challenge to my generation: in order to continue to have a significant role in our country's future, we must support each other. To my college bound peers I say: remember our brothers and sisters in the military; be aware of their sacrifice and email your Senator to improve the GI bill and ensure better education and job training once our bravest and best come home. However, my generation can only have a role in America's future by exercising our right to vote, to ensure that our voices are heard. Elect those who will protect, honor, and defend America's interests. We must do this in the name of all those generations before us who have fought and died protecting our country, so that they will not have died in vain. We must do this to honor those of my generation that have given so much and have already made the ultimate sacrifice. Finally, we must do this for that Private from Tennessee. He will not be home for Christmas, he will not see his sister begin her career at West Point; but he will live on as an inspiration for my generation, living and dying to protect America's future.