

2015-2016 Voice of Democracy Contest

First Place National Winner

Grayson Campbell
Florida

"My Vision for America"

In 1997 I became an American. I was born into freedom and I have been afforded rights and opportunities that so many around the world will never experience. What I wasn't born with was the heart of an American.

My patriot's heart journey began many years ago, when I was a middle school student attending a Veteran's Day ceremony. During the ceremonial march of the color guard and presentation of the American Flag, I noticed an elderly gentleman in partial uniform seated directly in front of me, struggling to get up on his feet from his wheelchair. A younger woman next to him assisted the frail gentleman to stand, and when he straightened up, he took off his veteran's cap and placed his hand over his heart. I will never forget that man, as he became the model of what I wish we would all have: a patriot's heart.

I don't remember much about the ceremony or who spoke, because I stared at that gentleman, wondering why he would bother to stand in honor of old glory, and why tears filled his eyes as the speaker talked about World War II. Soon after that, I began to understand as I read stories about World War II and studied other conflicts like the Civil War, Revolutionary War, World War I, and the Korean and Vietnam Wars. By studying history, my heart for this country transformed as I learned how our country was woven from threads spun from conflicts, and how our nation was built on the backs of those who sacrificed much and carried the colors for all of us.

I also studied dictators like Mao Tse-tung, Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini, and I came to understand the astounding worth of our nation and the extraordinary wisdom of those who founded the greatest nation on earth. Knowing how fortunate I was to live in the land of the free and the home of the brave, my patriot's heart grew more grateful.

My vision for America is that each citizen of this outstanding nation will have a patriot's heart. For a patriot's heart knows and appreciates our history, and will never want to forget how we got here or whose shoulders we stand on. A patriot's heart knows what our flag stands for and will not dare sit when "Old Glory" is presented. A patriot's heart loves this country, defends its liberty, seeks the greater good, and will never allow our God-given, inalienable rights to be restricted. A patriot's heart realizes the sacrifices that it took to make our nation great, and will never allow those who have defended freedom to be forgotten. So, a patriot's heart reveres and salutes our veterans. Instead of buying a shirt printed with Captain America (or one of the Kardashians) a patriot's heart would prefer to honor a veteran by putting them on a shirt and telling his or her story of service and sacrifice. Lastly, a patriot's heart embraces three hallowed words, spoken over 50 years ago by General Douglas MacArthur: "Duty, Honor, Country."

When I think of duty, honor and country, I am reminded once again of that gentleman in front of me at that Veteran's Day ceremony who demonstrated a true patriot's heart. I would love to wear a shirt to honor him, but I never knew his name. However, I did learn some of his story. Following the ceremony, I learned that he had served in Germany during WWII and that he had actually brought a photo album with him from his time there. In that album were photos and newspaper clippings of the concentration camp that he helped liberate during WWII. The pictures I remember most were those of train cars with open doors, stacked high with bloated, bald, naked bodies.

My young mind could not even begin to process the horrors and lack of humanity, for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was all I had ever known. What I did realize at that time was that the will and moral courage of our veterans, our patriots' hearts, defeated evil back then. That is why my vision for America is that each citizen of this great nation will have a patriot's heart, because then, just like in generations past, we will be able to overcome any struggle.

The wise words of Ronald Reagan have never been more clear: "Freedom is never more than one generation from distinction; we didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same." Yes, Mr. Reagan, it is not passed in the bloodstream, but it can, and must, be passed in the heart--a patriot's heart.