

FOURTH PLACE RECIPIENT

The Price of Comfort

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A classroom should always be safe for learning, but it can quickly transform into a hostile environment. In my AVID classroom, I witnessed an ethical dilemma, which not only helped me build my courage, but also helped me understand the morals of responsibility. A classmate of mine at the time, experienced gentle, involuntary, and melodic hums that escaped her mouth. Despite that, she never disrupted the class since it was so quiet. At some point, a male student sitting near her caught on to her hums and got irritated. Every time she made these sounds, he reached over, and hit her arm. Watching this unfold filled me with an immediate sense of injustice as my classmate sat there defeated. It challenged me if I was going to be a bystander, and avoid any discomfort, or I could intervene and help my classmate.

In school, we often face the issue of not just academic work, but we are also faced with the coursework of moral concepts throughout it. Sitting in that classroom tested my ability to differentiate between right and wrong. Having to be exposed so early of a concept that sometimes even adults don't understand, can help me build those moral understandings to have better reactions each time. I realized that ignoring physical abuse would make me a part of it if I chose not to act. Ethics teaches students that silence is not a neutral stance, but rather that you favor it, just because one wants to be comfortable. Being a bystander also means that I would be abandoning my ethical duty to protect my vulnerable peers.

Driven by this realization, I chose to act. Each time my male classmate would raise his hand to strike her, I stood up and told him loudly to stop hitting her. As I actively stood up, I told him that behavior was unacceptable and even told him if it bothered him so much, I would trade seats with him. This caused the bully to back down out of embarrassment since everyone was staring at us, but he remained in his seat. After class, I stayed by my friend's side to ensure she felt safe.

This experience fundamentally changed how I viewed myself. I built a sense of courage for someone in my community and I realized if I could do it for someone, I could also do it for myself too. Ethics has also taught me that moral education is useless if one is not exposed to it. We need to be involved in our community to stop ethical dilemmas from happening and reflect on them. Even if one's heart is racing from the discomfort of intervening, it's better to face the consequences rather than it getting worse. Defending my peer taught me that empathy has to be active and that it showed me if one voice can speak up, that voice has the power to disrupt cruelty and encourage others to do the same.