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March for Our Lives: Hope Through Anger

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My activism started at the dinner table—not because I wanted to ruin Thanksgiving, but because I did not have a choice. I embody an intersection of identities. I am not White enough for my US family or Latina enough for my Argentinian family and my sexuality serves as a dangerous point of debate, regardless of which culture I step into.

For a long time, I avoided conflict, biting my tongue until it bled. If I did not learn how to speak, my labels would have always spoken for me: woman, biracial, Latina, queer, but still human. Eventually, I realized that protecting my existence meant embracing my cross-sectional identity and using my voice to claim words and space for my identity.

My social consciousness changed with the Pulse nightclub shooting in June 2016. When I heard the news, I had to hide my shaky hands by pressing them down onto the dinner table. I was drowning in my thoughts—Latinx night... Pride month... less than three hours away. People in my community who had the courage to embrace and protect their intersectional identities were dead, and it was impossible for me to act. I saw myself reflected in the 49 who died, but I was powerless with my bleeding tongue.

Two years passed. I came out at school. It was the one place I could be out because I was able to make my voice heard through conversations with other students. When the Marjory Stoneman Douglas (MSD) shooting happened, I remembered the Pulse shooting and that same fear swept over me. Parkland is only an hour away. Those fourteen students who died could have been me. This time, for me, inaction was not an option. I resolved not to let violence define my existence, as it had once been after Pulse. I would not allow that to happen again.

Something had to be done while the spotlight was still on MSD, while people still cared enough to act. I knew other students felt the same way. It was their tears, gritted teeth, and

outraged whispers that affirmed my desire to take action and bring March for Our Lives to my community, but I had no idea how our school administration would react or how many students would participate. Feeling discouraged by unknowns, I brought my plan before my teacher. He encouraged me to move forward, no matter what anyone thought. What mattered instead, was that students and minorities stopped needlessly dying, not the approval of the authority that had decided that student lives and minority lives were not worth protecting.

I listened for the students who were the angriest, and I found it was the students who had violence impact them before. Students in the LGBT community and students of color were not strangers to violence. I started conversations with them, ending in our agreement that gun violence was preventable. Everyone I spoke to wanted to do something, but they were not certain where to begin. I told them about the walkout I was organizing. They all agreed to join without hesitation.

I set up accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. I plastered my own social media with digital flyers. I asked other people to share posts and help me reach a wider audience. My network of activists grew beyond those who had felt the sting of bullets aimed at their communities; the March for Our Lives started gaining momentum across different spectrums of identity. Soon, other students coordinating walkouts at their high schools emailed me to ask how our school was managing our protest. Students of all backgrounds planned to assemble together across schools in Sarasota County to show our commitment to make gun violence surrender. Our collective fear and anger was transformed into hope—hope that our voices were being heard beyond our immediate communities.

Even amongst the emerging optimism, it was apparent that not everyone believed the endeavor worthwhile. A friend told me about students mocking not just the protest, but also my intersectional motives as someone who kept Pulse in my thoughts. It was impossible for critics to think that one school shooting could catalyze enough support to change decades of policy, especially after lawmakers showed their apathy toward the subject in the wake of Pulse. Ultimately, they were indifferent to the space youth engagement was creating for national conversation about gun control and its impact beyond isolated student communities.

Once the March for Our Lives gained traction at our school, a series of negotiations took place with the school administration. It was agreed that the walkout would be focused through different stations for students to channel their voices. Beyond organizing the event, I was responsible for drafting letters of petition and giving a speech at the end of the seventeen minutes to inspire carrying our actions forward.

The morning of the walkout, I was nervous that my peers would decide the protest was not worth their time. As time ticked away my fears grew. Relief washed over me when—after I stood up first to leave—the rest of my class, including my teacher, left too. I watched students trickle in from around campus, each carrying different identities and experiences. Soon the grass was flooded with students committed to changing something bigger than themselves. Friends helped circulate my petition: “We want someone who will act on behalf of our voices. That is, the voices of all American students living in fear of another mass shooting. In this country, we should not have to be afraid of a violation of our basic rights—our right to live. It is our classmates who were murdered. It is we who will suffer the consequences of your inaction.” I collected almost 200 signatures.

When the seventeen-minute protest was almost over, I used my voice to share what gun violence means to me: “I worry daily when I think about my sister at school. Every day when I pick her up, I’m grateful. Because I know, if someone walked on campus and stole her life with a bullet, I would be devastated. And I know that that’s the reality of what happened to the families of the victims of the shooting in Parkland. I am sad, I am tired, I am frustrated, I am angry. These are our friends, these are our family members. We are dying. We already lived through Pulse; *another* mass shooting is inexcusable. Something must be done. Mass shootings are preventable. As students, it is time to stand up for our right to be heard. Each person dead is one person too many. I don’t want anyone else to be another statistic. This is enough. This stops now.”

After my short speech, I spoke each MSD victim’s name. Their names held power. Not one student spoke during the minute of silence. The news anchor that evening spoke about how hundreds of campuses across the United States had participated in walkouts to some degree. Despite my fears and my peers’ reservations, I helped make the voices in my community a part of a larger picture full of intersectionality. The walkout was never just me.