**Your Voice is the Key to Unlock the Door of Opportunity**

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"Words have the power to both destroy and heal. When words are both true and kind, they can change our world." -- Buddha

Imagine.

A single mother walking down a busy downtown Seattle street. She clutches her purse for protection to relieve her fears as men and women pass her by. She wanders to nearby hotels and restaurants to find any type of employment because she is responsible for raising four sons and two daughters in a neighborhood stricken by poverty. She is armed with nothing but a smile etched onto her face to disguise her hungry stomach and constant worry for her family. At every business she encounters she is turned away for her lack of English speaking ability and struggles against her Vietnamese language barrier. She is harassed and mocked because of her accent and native tongue. She returns home to her children huddled together around the stove to keep warm. Her spirit remains intact, determined to make tomorrow then today.

This woman is my mother.

At a young age my mother made it her priority to teach me how to speak English as much as she could, so I would never have to bear the hardships she faced early on in America. At home my family only spoke Vietnamese and naturally I soaked up the language besides learning English. She placed me into Seattle Public schooling as soon as possible to teach me English and at that time she worked and supported my family while I was learning. She would come home late every night and some mornings I would find her gone, only to wake up to a small brown paper lunch bag where she once laid to take to school. So at a young age I understood my mom would not always be there to pull out every loose tooth or scare away the monsters underneath my bed because she was out working scaring away the real monsters; the ones who would turn off your electricity or would leave a pot of rice empty during dinner time. In school I never felt like I fit in with my classmates. I could not talk to my friends or teachers because they all spoke English. I began to suffer from what my mother wanted to protect me from all those years ago. I was unable to say simple phrases such as, “I am hungry” or “I need to go to the bathroom.” I was forced to point to objects that communicated my thoughts. I was helpless and alone. I felt trapped in a mental prison. I remember school days where I would sit with a Dr. Seuss book *Green Eggs and Ham* and stare at the unfamiliar words for hours. I came home one day after school to find my mother sobbing with my older brother because she had been fired from her job for being unable to communicate with her co-workers. As I embraced my mom, her wet tears soaked my cheeks and she told me to continue to do well in school and learn to speak, read, and write English as well as possible.

From then on I desired to do nothing but learn English. At school I forced myself to speak English no matter how many of my peers poked fun at me. I read any text that I could from books to Sesame Street television captions and even shampoo bottles, anything that had words and I could get my hands on. As my English improved my family condition declined. My eldest brothers were forced to abandon college and work two jobs in order to support the family. Eventually as I entered my junior high years I was speaking fluent English and reading at a high school level. I joined the speech and debate team and challenged myself to utilize my language skills and compete to win. From this I learned the power and value of words especially how essential it is to express one’s emotions or ideas. It was not until after winning my first debate competition did I decide to become a civil attorney in order to represent those who cannot speak for themselves, people like my mother.

All throughout high school I became more and more confident with my language skills. I gave speeches about leadership to filled gymnasiums of my peers. I motivated crowds of people from my community with my words and recited poetry in order to express myself creatively. Last year, with my voice and communication abilities I received speech scholarships that funded my college tuition and allowed me to attend a public university and strive closer toward my dreams. However, all this could not have been possible if my mother had never sacrificed her dreams. If she had not encouraged me every day to continue to learn English; her sacrifice was the key to unlock a new door of opportunity.

With my strengthened voice I strive to bridge the language gap between Vietnamese and English. I wish to continue to encourage my generation of individuals to not forget their heritage and learn their native tongues. With great power comes even greater responsibility. With the power of words it is my responsibility to help free those who are still trapped within mental prison, as I once was, in order to open a door of opportunity toward a road of success.

Work Cited

"Great Quotes and Sayings about Words." *My Favorite Ezines -* Web. 7 Aug. 2010. <http://www.myfavoriteezines.com/ezinedirectory/quotes-about-words.html>.

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