

Olivia Huber

Grade 12

Forest Hills Eastern High School

Liberty: A Life Of Opportunity

Walking down the rutted, dirt roads of rural Zambia, a young man dreams of a different future: a life of opportunity. As he continues, he turns into a single room church building, light streaming in through dilapidated windows, and takes his place at the front of the room. Sitting all around him are young men and women, passionate about substantial, systemic change in their nation of Zambia. While they are immensely proud of their nation and identity, they share a dream for a better Zambia, a better world. The members of Junior Parliament, an initiative started by a local organization, the Jubilee Centre, meet together to debate and discuss the most pressing issues facing their community and our world today. As I sat listening to their hopes and dreams for the future, I could not help but feel inspired by their strength, optimism, and intelligence. This group of young people represents an anomaly in Zambian society as they challenge the corrupt government and achieve tangible change through their conversations and campaigns. Their voice is heard. Their demands are acknowledged. They inspire real change.

In a country dominated by corrupt government officials -- consumed by avarice and megalomania -- change is often hard to achieve. As a result of recent elections, there has been a massive shift towards diminishing civil rights and liberties. Freedom of the press is virtually nonexistent as all major newspapers and communication organizations have been shut down. Poverty is ubiquitous and disease destroys village after village, while government leaders live in lavish houses, the epitome of affluence and wealth. Weak legal systems hinder justice and a lack of political tolerance impinges on freedom of speech. However, Ray Zulu Jr. and his fellow members of Junior Parliament desire to ameliorate the political system of their country. They mobilize trash clean ups in urban slums, learn from leadership conferences, and continue an ongoing dialogue with government representatives. They strive for liberty and justice for all.

Liberty is more than freedom from oppression; liberty is freedom for opportunity. For Ray Zulu Jr. and thousands like him, liberty can be defined as education and employment and simply having a voice. Liberty provides one with the chance to choose a different story -- to pursue desired dreams and to acquire advantageous opportunities. Without societal restraints or political restrictions, the rights of dignity, stability, and independence become within reach.

Liberty is not only important abroad, but is critical at home. Living in a world where current debates are dominated by questions of security and arguments concerning what it really means to provide liberty and justice for all people, an understanding of holistic liberty is more crucial now than ever. Our definition of liberty influences the crux of our decisions and opinions and actions as it ultimately defines our values and beliefs. Liberty is about more than us; liberty affects everyone. As highlighted by Nelson Mandela, “For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”¹ As we seek liberty in our own lives, we must also fight for liberty in the lives of the other. We welcome the refugee, we support the immigrant, we care for the orphan, we help the marginalized. Whether we are working for liberty and justice at home or abroad, may we not forget the inalienable dignity and irrefutable value of human life. May we be a people courageous enough to stand up, to speak up, to fight for liberty and justice for all.

¹ Durando, Jessica. "15 of Nelson Mandela's Best Quotes." *USA Today*. Gannett Satellite Information Network, 06 Dec. 2013. Web. 24 Apr. 2017.