

Two springs ago, I met a young man named Mark. Mark had nine piercings, he stood six foot four and he admitted to previously smoking high amounts of illegal drugs. Mark redefined the meaning of integrity.

Here's why.

I met Mark at a youth leadership conference at Michigan State University. My first impression of him was that he had more than twice the amount of piercings I had on his face alone, and that he could almost definitely pick me up with his pinkie finger. Once I got to know him fairly well, I realized how surprisingly timid and how brilliantly smart he truly was. Sentences flowed from his mouth with beautiful articulation, and he seemed as if he would make a perfect contestant on Jeopardy.

On the last day of the conference Mark also mentioned he never had a much of a father figure in his life both, literally and spiritually. "I grew up with just my mom. She didn't believe in God, so I didn't either. And, well, I really just don't get it," he shrugged. "I've tried reading about Catholicism and Christianity and everything, I just can't feel a connection with it."

As I swallowed a lump in my throat, I told him that I had spent the last sixteen years of my life as a plaid-skirt-wearing Catholic school girl, and had grown up in a Catholic family since birth. Mark just scoffed and mumbled, "Man, uniforms would suck."

The final activity of the conference features an enlightening motivational speech held in a giant Michigan State lecture hall. After listening to an introduction about achieving goals and optimizing leadership skills and all of those wonderful things, the speaker requested some crowd interaction. High schoolers piled on stage, Mark along with them.

He asked each student to line up on front stage, poster board in hand. Each poster depicted a specific profession: policeman, doctor, rockstar, teacher, business man, lawyer. The

task was to line up "in order of importance." In the middle of the group stood Mark. My jaw plummeted to the ground. His poster read: priest.

Mark did not believe in God.

The instant he realized what he was holding, his mouth formed into a goofy, crooked smile. His eyes somehow found mine, as if to send me a telepathic message of "Well, well, what are the chances of this happening." Looking down the line, Mark decided his place to stand was somewhere near teacher and doctor.

Not many people in that lecture hall realized the incredible feat they had just witnessed. But I knew. In that moment, Mark exhibited the true meaning of integrity. Though a priest had no role in his life, he knew that a priest had a major role in hundreds of other people's lives who were sitting in that lecture hall. How can the dictionary define integrity as "moral uprightness" if so many different people have so many different opinions and morals? Everyone would have his or her own definition of integrity if this was true.

Integrity can have a lip piercing. Integrity can stand at six foot four. Integrity can wear plaid skirts or whatever it wants to wear as long as it focuses on the good of others. Caring about the opinions and morals of others before those of oneself truly manifests the pinnacle of integrity. Mark demonstrated that level of integrity by recognizing that the most honorable way to present himself was to disregard himself and respect others.