A New Voice

"*The limits of my language means the limits of my world" - Ludwig Wittgenstein*

Language is simultaneously one of the most beneficial and detrimental means of human connection. It can bring people together; it can tear worlds apart. But it is the existence of language that gives humans a choice to create connections or disconnections.

Growing up, I was constantly surrounded by people who optimized language to achieve the latter; I remember holes in walls and dishes that shattered at a volume akin to that in which words were released into the atmosphere. I only ever wanted it to be silent for just a fleeting moment. The production of sound had only ever succeeded in causing me dread. As a result of this, I inherently understood that to be silent was ideal; no one could notice me and use their language for harm if I didn't give them a presence to acknowledge.

By the time I was in seventh grade, it didn't matter how silent I was. My mother had become vociferous enough to account for both herself and me. No matter how hard I tried to quietly hide in the shadows, her words exited as if over a megaphone everytime she spoke, hateful and angry. Eventually more and more people began to listen, and some even took action.

Foster care was a sudden experience; for the first time in my life, I was encompassed by people who utilized language for positivity. However, it was hard for me to feel like this language was my own. For so long, the absence of language is where I'd found comfort; it had always been used against me. Where was I to find my voice? As my time in foster care continued, I remained quiet hearted, still not quite understanding how to use language to express who I was.

Time had flown by me and suddenly I was a high school freshman taking on my first few weeks of classes. Most freshman courses are baseline, foundational ones: plain and simple. Even so, I found myself heavily enjoying my French 1 course. The complexities of language learning in such an uplifting manner paired with the fun-filled classroom community left me always excited to return. Understanding past tense, future tense, hypothetical tense, and even "verlan", a

unique type of French slang – it was such a jovial feeling to be within such a fulfilling academic environment while alongside people who shared my enthusiasm; it was one of those feelings you wish you could rewind and relive for the first time again as if it was your favorite movie or song.

Being bilingual has allowed me to grow both as a scholar and as a human. Not only have my dedicated efforts to French resulted in being certified with the Seal of Biliteracy this year, but I've also obtained a plethora of valuable memories thanks to French – holiday crepe parties, year end karaoke sessions, and even painting murals on the classroom walls. While I grew up learning that language was destructive, my second language taught me the opposite; it taught me how words were invented to bring people together. I've learned how to take these lessons outside of the classroom and use them to reflect on my first language and its usage, whether it's as a singer in our vocal jazz ensemble, as a player on our Ultimate Frisbee team, or as a friend to those I love most.

I'm no longer the shy and silenced kid. I've been able to reshape my identity into that of a proud academic whose generosity can be heard miles away. Through the use of not just one, but two languages, I've found my voice and redefined my possibilities to be endless.