

The Journey That Changed Me

Throughout my childhood, I labeled myself the most impatient person in the world. I quit swimming, tennis, art, pottery, ice skating, ukulele, and piano—all before the age of nine. People often wonder why I quit. I lack athleticism, comprehension, and musical proficiency. But before all of this, I lacked the ability to speak up. While it sounds simple, it was nearly seventy percent of the reason why I quit so much.

One summer, I sat on my booster seat in my dad's car. The same one I was bullied for using just a few hours ago. The same one I had sat on the way to my tennis lesson, where someone made an uncomfortable comment. I still remember the feeling of cold sweat, panic, and anxiety rising as I sprinted to my dad's car as fast as I could. That day, I went home and announced that I would be quitting tennis. Did I want to? No. I loved tennis, but the people there were unbearable enough for me to make that decision. My parents always asked me why I had quit, but I swore to myself to never let the secret out. They didn't find out the true reason until five years later. In between those five years, I was given something that always seemed impossible to reach—a voice.

I predicted fifth grade to be like any other—listening to the background noise while talking to my one and only friend. I sat in my chair and filled out my morning worksheet, listening to the teacher. Then, the PA announcement turned on. The weather report was first, then the Pledge of Allegiance, and finally the special announcement. “And finally, for fifth and sixth graders, sign up for our new debate club!” the nice lady said over the speaker. Debate. The word tossed around my head for the rest of the day. Later that day, I picked up my instrument and headed down the long hallway. Ignoring the posters put up for campaigning was a part of my daily routine. But this time, the words “Join” and “Debate” kept catching my eye. That day, I went home and told my mom—who suggested that I give it a try. That was enough for me to agree. I never suspected that the decision would have such an extraordinary impact. It was inevitable.

My first tournament was an absolute disaster, and I didn't know. I thought I was doing my role as a third speaker quite well (I was doing the opposite of what I was supposed to). Hands trembling, voice unsure, I stood in the unfamiliar classroom and spoke in front of the largest audience I ever had—which was less than eight people. My team lost all three rounds, so I didn't know what the feeling of excitement in my stomach was when they began to announce the awards. I was so happy. But not long after, the pattern continued. My team lost frequently and never got awards. So the flushed feeling of enjoyment started to deflate. I ended fifth grade with zero awards, and the question filled my head once more: “Should I quit?”

I got my answer at the beginning of sixth grade, when I decided to join again. I told myself, “One more year. Just give it one more year, then you can quit for sure.” I found myself working hard again in the afterschool club. Without realizing it, I was slowly stepping out of my comfort zone. I asked others for help, and I gave help to others. It was entirely possible that others didn’t take the debate club as seriously, but I felt delighted by the atmosphere. In the second tournament of the year, my team won first place while I won ninth place individually. The whole time, I found myself cheering and yelling for my school. I celebrated with people I’ve never talked to before, but it felt familiar. Then, there was that feeling again. A warm flush in my stomach, the sudden urge to shout and smile from giddiness.

In seventh grade, I joined the debate club without hesitation. I had a new team, but it didn’t change anything. The tournaments were different—more complicated and stressful. Many times I wanted to quit, but I couldn’t bring myself to do so. Every tournament felt like a promise, bringing back the feeling of adrenaline and passion. That year, I had more friends than I would’ve ever imagined having. I had wondered who would teach me to speak up, and I have my answer. I would be lying if I said growing up shaped me, because debate is what changed me the most.