

2026 Elie Wiesel Competition

2nd Place Senior Essay

Zara Guliani, 9th Grade

Cape Henry Collegiate, Amy Martin

More Than a Stereotype

Unchecked hatred and scapegoating have been evident throughout history, from the horrors of the Holocaust to the prejudice that continues to persist in our world today. During the Holocaust, millions of Jewish people were dehumanized, blamed for their society's problems, and placed in a system where their identity consisted of a seven-digit number. Growing up as a Sikh woman in a conservative, insular community, I have personally felt and seen the weight that stereotypes and assumptions can carry. At times, the difference in my culture, religion, and even my appearance has made people treat me differently. Though my experiences are far from the horrific events of the Holocaust, they demonstrate how even small acts of hatred and scapegoating can alter how individuals and communities are seen. Being surrounded by acts of subtle bias has shown me that confronting hatred isn't something that is only seen in a classroom. It is something I face every day.

I have encountered prejudice in everyday settings, from casual jokes about my culture to the assumption of my academic ability. I'm sorry to say despite my parents' best wishes, I'm not going to end up on the pre-med track, and I have never won the schoolwide spelling bee. Though some of these stereotypes aren't necessarily negative traits, others generalize Indian people, which restricts us to a box, often turning an entire community into a scapegoat for assumptions and expectations. Even small, everyday comments have made me feel self-conscious about my heritage and who I am. Similar to my personal experiences, the Holocaust began with what seemed like socially acceptable acts of discrimination and dehumanizing language. Those early acts of hatred were overlooked before the Holocaust and escalated into a deeper-rooted bias towards Jewish people. Hatred isn't something that suddenly makes itself apparent; it grows through repeated microaggressions, whether it is a socially accepted joke, derogatory language, or judging people by the color of their skin. The effects of unchecked hatred can leave a lasting mark on someone's self-esteem and how they navigate society.

A lot of the hatred I've faced has gone unchallenged and unnoticed by the people around me. Over time, this has had a real influence on how I view myself and my place in my community. Being repeatedly stereotyped has made me feel like I need to prove myself to the people around me or even minimize the parts of my identity that make me different. In many cases, these stereotypes turn into a form of scapegoating, where an entire group is blamed, judged, or defined by a narrow set of assumptions. History shows that when hatred and scapegoating become accepted or "normal" it strips people of their sense of belonging. During the Holocaust, millions of Jewish people were stripped of their identity. They were portrayed as threats rather than people, this behavior allowed violence and discrimination to be rationalized. Though the hatred we see today is less significant in scale and impact than the Holocaust, it

can still be harmful to the individual or group subject to it. When prejudice, racial bias, and scapegoating go unchallenged, it can erode confidence and make people feel isolated in their own community.

Over time, I have learned that resilience doesn't mean explaining myself, but it means speaking up for myself. When I start to understand that someone else's opinion of me or my culture may be negative, I choose not to internalize it. I have come to realize that people who refuse to accept my culture or see it as a stereotype are not worth the emotional energy it would take me to conform to their standards. It's evident throughout history that hatred and scapegoating thrive when no one speaks out against it, as it did during the Holocaust. Jewish people were blamed and became targets for a problem they weren't even at the root of. This pattern of unchallenged blame shows how dangerous scapegoating can become on a larger scale. While you can't control the way others think, the power their assumptions hold in your life is ultimately up to you. Learning to value my identity has been a personal act of resistance. I learned to appreciate my identity and where I came from and move away from the narrow perception others had of me.

Throughout history and in the everyday lives of millions of people everywhere, it's easy to see that anyone can be reduced to a stereotype. The Holocaust is by far the most devastating example of this, a time where violence became justified towards a group. And why? Because people saw them solely as threats. Prejudice today follows a similar pattern of reducing people to the idea you have of them. Offensive jokes may come from a stranger or your closest friend. Nonetheless it is not harmless. When we don't speak out against these acts of prejudice it only reinforces the stereotypes assigned to groups. Recognizing the harm that a simple joke can have on an individual has taught me that confronting these actions isn't about winning an argument; it's about protecting the dignity of yourself and others. By challenging scapegoating and unchecked hatred, I act on the responsibility history has left us: to question and confront hatred before it spreads.