

2026 Elie Wiesel Competition

1st Place Senior Poetry

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Dreyfoos School of the Arts, Carmen Gallardo

The Quiet Place Where Courage Begins

I learned once in history class
that silence can be louder than shouting—
that whole cities can pretend not to hear
footsteps being dragged away in the dark.

I remember thinking how easy it is
to look down at your shoes
and tell yourself
someone else will speak up,
someone older,
someone braver,
someone not me.

But the stories from the Holocaust
don't let you sit comfortably like that.
They follow you
out of the classroom,
into the hallway noise,
past the jokes people make
to fit in or stay invisible.

Some days I catch myself
laughing along
just because I don't want to be "that kid,"
the one who says Stop. That's not right.
Even when I know it isn't.

And that's when I think about
the people who risked everything
just to hide a stranger,
or whisper truth through barred windows,
or refuse to move even when every rule told them to.

I wonder what it felt like—
their hearts probably beating too fast,
hands shaking,

knowing one choice
could break their whole world
but still choosing it anyway.

Sometimes courage looks like lightning,
but more often
I think it looks like a small flame,
cupped in two trembling hands,
protected from the wind
because letting it die
would mean letting yourself die
a little too.

I don't want to be someone
who lets the flame go out.
Not now, not when prejudice still walks our hallways,
and people get laughed at
for their names or their accents
or the way they pray
or the way they don't.

Maybe courage doesn't start
in some dramatic moment.
Maybe it starts quietly—
in the decision to use your voice
even when it cracks,
to stand beside someone
who's standing alone.

I'm still learning.
But I want to be the kind of person
who looks up,
who notices,
who refuses to pretend
they can't hear the footsteps
in the dark.

Because history isn't just something
we read in a textbook.
It's a warning and a responsibility—
a reminder that the world
can break in terrible ways
when ordinary people choose silence.

And maybe moral courage
is simply choosing
not to be silent anymore.