

## 2024 Elie Wiesel Competition

### 1<sup>st</sup> Place Junior Essay

Hunter Moye, 7<sup>th</sup> Grade

Norfolk Academy, Matthew Robertson

### *Overcoming Adversity*

Elie Wiesel shared “from then on, I had no other name” as a somber reflection of the tragedies that took place during the Holocaust. For many transported to the concentration camps their fate would be a physical death, but those who survived would experience a cultural death. No longer addressed by their names and stripped of their religion, Holocaust victims had to succumb to losing their identity as a means of survival. Within the home is where young children develop a familial sense of self, however a number of youths were displaced into orphanages where their identity would take on a new form not representative of their historical heritage. From the personal account of Kitty Saks, she was ridiculed for speaking her native language amongst her new French classmates. In today’s society many of us continue to experience lives that are imprisoned by the social pressures imposed from others which uproot us from our true selves.

Similar to the survivors of the Holocaust who were ousted for their differences, it is easy for one to lose their sense of self or struggle immensely to retain their identity. Just as seen in the past, conditions that can challenge one’s identity can directly correlate to having to overcome stereotypes placed on a person’s race and interests. Despite the inclusive and diverse progression American society has made over the decades, an unspoken racial stereotype that portrays all African-Americans as inferior in academic success and economic wealth is still the false narrative many hear. As a result, I retain my identity by proving any naysayer wrong. In addition to showing daily gratitude for the life I have been provided, I also use each day as an opportunity to write my own narrative which depicts an African-American student of high academic achievement.

Overcoming stereotypes associated with one’s interests, can create much peer pressure on social relationships. For example, most youth today tend to find themselves in cliques with others who share similar interests as they do. Peer pressure will oftentimes lead people to abandoning their sense of self as they mask behind a false persona to please others, which causes a person to devalue themselves as they reject their own authenticity. As a student-athlete many of my close friends are also my teammates; however, due to my various interests I also have friends who are not very athletic. Having different friend groups can sometimes contribute to the peer pressure of having to neglect one friend in order to please another. The most successful methods I have found to still retain my identity despite this peer pressure is maintaining a stance of neutrality, distancing myself from anyone who is not supportive of the multiple interests I possess, and staying true to myself.

In reality, we will all experience a social pressure that will force us to either be creatively resilient to retain our identity or submit to a false identity. Survivors of the Holocaust had no choice but to renounce their name, religion, and identity to survive. However, when I am personally faced with a social pressure that challenges my identity I am encouraged by those Holocaust survivors and know that I have a choice to retain who I am.