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Kneeling for a Nation: How One Team's Participation in a Nationwide Movement Developed Into a Force for Local Civic Change

“Your football team is an embarrassment to this great nation that we live in.”¹ Or so says Brian Gill in his Google review of Garfield High School, his only review of an establishment outside the Carolinas. We certainly don't think of ourselves as an embarrassment to the nation, even if for a long time we were a bit of an embarrassment to our school, a serial football underperformer at a school known for powerhouse basketball teams and jazz orchestras. Both of these changed one torrid afternoon in late August, when, spurred by the silent protests of Colin Kaepernick, our team made a decision to kneel during the national anthem.

There wasn't really much of a discussion to begin with, or even a catalyst. At some point between drills during the second half of a two-a-day, someone mentioned Kaepernick's sitting² to one of our coaches. That player didn't get an answer then, hardly having the time to listen before another whistle was blown, but when the practice concluded and our coaches were giving their final statements of the day, our whole team was offered an answer. No statement was made about the action itself; but we were told, however, to read the lyrics of Defence of Fort M'Henry in their entirety. I myself had not wanted to discuss the topic; it seemed petty and unimportant, the extra

¹ Google Review of Garfield High School left by Brian Gill, September 2016. Google Reviews, <https://www.google.com/search?sourceid=chrome-psyapi2&ion=1&ie=UTF-8&q=garfield%20high%20school&oq=garfield%20high%20school&aqs=chrome..69i57j0l5.2792j0j7&rct=j#lrd=0x54901456b6563b6b:0x294764f712022791,1>,

² Wyche, Steve. "Colin Kaepernick Explains Why He Sat during National Anthem." NFL.com. NFL.com, 27 Aug. 2016. Web. 14 Mar. 2017. <<http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap3000000691077/article/colin-kaepernick-explains-why-he-sat-during-national-anthem>>.

stanzas probably lifted from some fake historical document or similar poem of the time. But, sure enough, I checked the poem's wikipedia page, and the extra stanzas denounced slaves for escaping to the British.

I wasn't the only one to have a revelation that night. At practice the next day a handful of seniors approached our coaching staff and asked if they would be allowed to sit during the national anthem at our next game. Ultimately our coaches decided to flip the question on its head; would the rest of the team feel comfortable with players kneeling during the national anthem? A vote was held in the locker room, and no one raised a hand to object. From there, a plan was formed. When our team was to assemble into a single file line for the national anthem, those that wished to protest would kneel, helmet in their right hand, their left hand on the shoulder of the man in front of them. Those that didn't want to participate were free to, but were asked to stand in the back so that everyone who was kneeling would be able to reach out to the person in front of them.

I was more than a little conflicted. We had planned on kneeling during our participation in the Memorial Football Classic. I wasn't the only player who wasn't sure if he'd kneel, considering the event was sponsored by the National Guard and was the day before the 15th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Ultimately, the anthem wasn't played, as we were the third game that day, and our protest was postponed to our September 16th game against West Seattle High.

My emotions were running high: it was my first game since surgery, I was sick with a vicious head cold, and our plans to kneel had been leaked to the media. Our

athletic director and school principal came to speak to us before we boarded the buses for the game. We were told that whether we stood or kneeled, our school would support us. Our coaching staff reiterated that they, too, would support us regardless of what we did. Our athletic director concluded the meeting by telling us that if we kneeled, we had to do it with all of what we were. It couldn't be for a fad, or for the media attention. If we kneeled, we had to absolutely believe in what we were kneeling for.

I thought long and hard on those words as we rode the bus into West Seattle. Did I believe that protesting the national anthem was the proper way to call attention to police brutality? Should I kneel because the third stanza of Francis Scott Key's "Defense of Fort M'Henry" is racist? We arrived at the South-West Athletic Complex before I arrived at a conclusion.

When the time came, we moved to the sideline and formed up single file, just as we had at our two previous games. I was sandwiched between two fellow linemen. The young man in front of me, Israel, turned around.

"Do it with all your heart, or don't do it all," he called.

A moment later the music began and our coach gave us a signal. Left knee down, helmet on our right knee, left hand on the man in front of us. Just as we had planned, we kneeled. I knew why I kneeled. I couldn't articulate it until later that night, but in that moment I was compelled to drop to my knee, to put my hand on Israel's shoulder.

Israel is huge. at well over six feet tall and near 300 lbs, he fits the bill of most high-profile police killings. He's big, tall, strong, and black. All traits that make him far more likely than me to be the victim of police brutality.

His father is a preacher. He likes fishing on Lake Union. He made a promise to himself that he would never use curse words.

The young man behind me, with his massive hand firmly holding the back of my shoulder pads, goes by the nickname "Cookie." His real name is Jeremiah.

We often share a hug before a game. He loves my dog and always asks how he's doing. He's a father at only 16, and though he won't admit, I fear he often fights serious depression.

Both are intelligent, funny, caring young men. Young men that in a post-racial America would only ever be seen as such. Young men that wouldn't have suffered any injustices or grievances to compel them to kneel during the national anthem. But that's not the America we live in, and those aren't the lives they've lived.

So when I kneeled, I did so because I recognized that only an inherently unjust and flawed system would abuse these young men to the point where they felt they could not, in good faith, participate in one of America's most cherished civic traditions. And neither could I.

Civic courage is an interesting thing; no one on the field that night *wanted* to be an activist, or to make a change. It was an emotional decision, a gut feeling that something was very wrong, finally given a productive and nonviolent means of release. That being said, for most players it was a short lifetime's experiences of racial injustice trying to release itself in only a minute and a half. It was a taste; a taste of *doing something*, something mightier than anything before. But, as the referees, other players, and even other coaches proved, it was also a taste of the violence and bigotry our team would be subject to for the rest of the season and beyond.

Having had the weekend to formulate our thoughts and emotions from Friday's events, our team showed up Monday morning expecting to get right into practice. As we sat down in our school's health room for our daily briefing there were murmurs about the fallout on our Facebook page; the local news station's report on us had gone viral, and thousands of people had been to our tiny page of 500 likes. While many left likes or messages of encouragement, dozens more left angry tirades about everything from military service to the ungratefulness of "thugs" like my teammates. Worst of all were the threats, which, though few in number, often included the specific names of athletes and coaches. While the threat of violence from an stranger on the internet was more than sobering for all of us (and some of the athletes in the room were as young as 14), the true weight of our actions and their consequences did not yet ring true. We waited in that room for over an hour, thinking things over. Our coach had in the past been a few minutes late to early morning practices; his wife was pregnant with his fourth child, the other three still very young. But as time dragged on in that small, poorly ventilated room, worries started to form. Was coach's wife having a baby? Was there an accident on the highway? The reality was worse than any of us could have imagined at that point.

It was over an hour before our head coach finally arrived. The elephant in the room was immediately addressed: when he had walked out his front door that morning he had found his tires slashed. Vague threats from an overzealous stranger from another state on Facebook are one thing, tangible criminal violence against your own coach is another. Practice was cancelled that Monday. Instead of going over plays and examining film from last week's game, we held a family meeting. Both the players and coaching staff quickly realized that *we had never actually discussed why were we*

kneeling. There were myriad reasons we kneeled, and as players around the room voiced their own reasons for kneeling our head coach wrote them down. Common themes were police violence against black males, school segregation and underfunding, and governmental and institutional racism. The discussion was immensely valuable, facilitating the construction of our press release,³ but also allowing the players and coaches to better understand each other. A question from one of my teammates still resonates with me today: “Why is my passion mistaken for aggression?” For everyone in the room, experiences like that one became a powerful motivation for continued civic action.

One of the main criticisms of our actions was that they were limited to the field, that kneeling didn’t accomplish anything of substance. Like so many other harsh criticisms, we as a team were more than aware of this one. We started by talking to the police. We had an open discussion with representatives of the Seattle Police Department; we did our homework, prepared our questions, and in the end it was a positive experience. One of our juniors followed up with the same representatives, his emails forwarded to Seattle Chief of Police Kathleen O’Toole, and a dialogue established with a detective interested in working with him to build better relationships between the SPD and black youths. We were later invited as guests to the NAACP’s regional conference.

³ Howard, Ted. "2016 Garfield High School's Football Team Statement." Garfield High School. Garfield High School, 21 Sept. 2016. Web. 14 Mar. 2017. <<http://www.principaltedhoward.com/2016/09/2016-garfield-high-schools-football-team-statement/>>.

When our team kneeled, we brought attention to the repeated racial injustices that make up the daily lives of so many of our players. Though most saw only a minute and a half of demonstration before each game, the players and coaches of the Garfield football team endured violence on the field and threats and vitriol both online and in our personal lives. It took a great deal of courage to kneel as a team the first time, and more to keep doing it, game after game, for the rest of the season. Our hope as a team is such acts of civic courage keep the discussion going, and become an integral part of Garfield football for years to come.

Works Cited

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