

2018 Essay Contest "Hear Me Out"

I paced back and forth in the right corner of the swimming pool, attempting to loosen up my shaky legs. As coach Sam called out my name for the next event, 500-yard freestyle, I gently placed goggles on my eyes and stepped up onto the block when the previous heat finished. I took a deep breath and assured myself, "I can do this." My heart was thumping rapidly and I hoped I could swim as fast as my current heartbeat rate.

I adjusted into a diving position as the referee announced, "Take your marks," and dived off with a burst of speed at, "Go!" I played around with my speed until I found the right pace. I was swimming at a smooth and strong pace. Whenever I breathed to my right side, I caught a glimpse of my coach urging me to swim faster. She was waving her arms vigorously, as if she could magically make me swim faster. I tried my best to follow her instructions. Little by little, yard by yard, I swiftly swam until I only had 50 yards left. I shifted into race mode and began to swim my fastest, and my legs started to burn. Finally, I slammed into the pad on the wall. I whirled around to peer at my time on the scoreboard.

Yes! I let out a yelp of glee and pumped a fist in the air. I had gotten a good time. Feeling jumpy with a beam on my face, I climbed out of the pool and scurried over to my coach. She also wore a grin on her face and gave me two thumbs up.

I scanned the audience and almost immediately spotted you, my dad, whose eyes were locked on me and traced me as I rushed in and out of the crowd of swimmers. I skipped to you, thrilled to share my joy with you. I could detect a subtle smile on the corner of your lips, which was fading and vanishing as I approached you. My smile froze as my leaping heart was sinking little by little. All you gave me was a gentle and reassuring pat on the shoulder.

"Good job. You improved a few seconds. You could probably get into the top 20 this time but did you see the improvement that Hailey and Emily* made? Wow, I believe they can get into the top 10!" your voice raised, followed by a sigh that only I could hear. "You have a long way to

* Names were changed to protect privacy

go. Work harder! Maybe we should consider private lessons,” you mumbled. I nodded softly, with a pouted mouth and silently trudged off to the locker room to shower.

Comparison, a common word in the daily vocabulary, is a buzzword in my life. In math competitions, debate, geography bowl, and everything else, I am being compared to other people. My improvements have been based on others. I happen to live in an Asian community that never lacks top performers in anything. Compared to those top winners, I was just an average, barely noticeable girl. In your eyes, I was not good enough, in spite of the endless effort I've put forth.

While I understand your desire and good will for my growth in sports, music, and academics, each time you compare me with others, I feel the stress on my shoulder piling up. The way you compare me with others sweeps away my joy and cripples my curiosity in those activities. I work hard to live up to your wishes and to make you happy and proud of me. Even if I give out 100% of my effort, I may still not be the fastest swimmer, the finest pianist, or the grand winner of the Math Olympiad.

It turns out I'm not the only "victim" of peer comparisons from parents. It is common among Asian communities. More than once, I have heard other parents make similar statements to their children in order to push them to reach the highest level. The funny thing is, while I am being compared, once in a while, I become the one that other parents compare their children to. In a summer swim team, I won two 1st place trophies, which earned admiring stares from several parents who murmured to their children and used me as their inspiration.

According to recent news reports, Asian American students are suffering more stress and even suicidal thoughts because of parental and societal pressure than those from other racial groups. Peer comparison is a major strategy that parents use to tap into students' full potential. To some people this may work well, but to many others, peer comparison can only make them feel emotionally drained, mentally exhausted, and physically burned out.

The truth is I am just an ordinary girl. Comparing me with others won't change that. I hope you can see the effort I've made and the progress that I am achieving. The progress may not be as striking as those top achievers, but it serves as building blocks that lead to some kind of bigger

success, a success that doesn't need to be justified through comparing with others. In a swim meet, I'd rather you acknowledge me dropping three seconds from my past record than congratulate me for beating someone by three seconds.

When I do not make any improvement in an activity, you don't have to remind me that someone outperforms me and is becoming a rising star. Lack of progress already sucks; your words can only add more pain. Comparing me with others at such moments makes me feel anxious, disoriented, and extremely awkward.

I am hoping you can teach me the meaning of failure and how to pick up myself when I fall. I am hoping you greet me with a warm-hearted smile and a big high five when I give my best performances. I am hoping you cheer for me as I am going through my teenage years and help me become a calm, confident, and resilient person.