

Strength in Numbers: Speaking Up to Fight Injustice and Unite Communities

Martin Luther King, Jr. was not afraid to speak out against injustice, even when others remained silent. Through his example, we learn how one courageous voice can lead to a movement capable of transforming societies. In his Steeler Lecture, Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” If we remain silent in the face of oppression, even when we are not victims ourselves, positive structural change cannot be fulfilled. Like Martin Luther King, Jr. who led the Civil Rights Movement, other influential leaders such as Tarana Burke and Emma González raised their voices to unite communities and spark lasting change through the #MeToo and #NeverAgain movements.

The American Civil Rights Movement fought against issues of racial discrimination and segregation throughout the United States, which eventually led to enduring societal change. The most famous leader of the movement was Martin Luther King Jr., an African American minister and activist who brought thousands of people together to peacefully protest during the March on Washington in 1963. He is best known for his “I Have a Dream” speech, during which he stood up for voiceless victims of oppression and expressed the importance of unity in the fight for justice. “We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back.” (Martin Luther King, Jr.). Like in the earlier introductory quote, King, Jr. emphasizes that we must refuse to be silent even in the face of adversity and work together toward this goal. Unity is the greatest factor that leads to a significant transformation of our society, as it has the power to transform a dream into a movement.

Similarly, the #MeToo movement has called for national change within the United States. Tarana Burke founded the movement in 2006, despite the fact that the hashtag became popular in 2017, to support survivors of sexual assault and harassment. Burke describes a heartbreaking moment that occurred when she was a youth camp director which inspired the #MeToo movement. A young girl at the camp shared that she had been sexually assaulted by her mother’s boyfriend. Burke was so distraught by the girl’s story that she cut her off and found another female counselor to help her. She stated, “I couldn’t help her release her shame, or impress upon her that nothing that happened to her was her fault. I could not find the strength to say out loud the words that were ringing in my head over and over again as she tried to tell me what she had endured...I watched her put her mask back on and go back into the world like she was all alone and I couldn’t even bring myself to whisper...me too” (Santiago). In this moment, Burke saw the pain on the girl’s face and the devastating impact of her own silence. It was then that Burke vowed “to help young women of color who had survived sexual abuse, assault, and exploitation” and to show them that they are not alone (Santiago). Through their shared experiences, a bond between survivors was created that has given them the courage to speak up.

The #MeToo movement has raised awareness about sexual assault, harassment and abuse, provided survivors a space to open up about their experiences, and promoted conversations between men and women alike about these issues. According to Burke, the essential goal of the movement is, “Survivors supporting survivors. And it’s really about community healing and community action” (Tarana Burke). The #MeToo movement wouldn’t have been as influential in our country or internationally if survivors had not gained courage from one another. Tarana Burke has devoted her life to helping survivors without asking to be famous or expecting to receive recognition. By using her voice and refusing to remain silent about a difficult topic, she has given countless survivors the means to heal from trauma.

Another powerful individual who stood up for justice in the face of tragedy is Emma González, a former student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, the site of a school shooting that led to the deaths of seventeen victims in 2018. In a time when hearing about mass shootings has become normalized, Emma González and her classmates David Hogg, Cameron Kasky, Alex Wind, and Jaclyn Corin, decided to protest for stricter gun control through the #NeverAgain movement. The importance of refusing to remain silent is expressed in an essay González wrote for the magazine *Harper’s Bazaar*, “We are tired of being ignored. So we are speaking up for those who don’t have anyone listening to them, for those who can’t talk about it just yet, and for those who will never speak again. We are grieving, we are furious, and we are using our words fiercely and desperately because that’s the only thing standing between us and this happening again” (González). Despite attacks on her character on sexual orientation, Emma González gained twice as many followers on Twitter as the National Rifle Association in just two weeks on the social media site and is steadfast in her commitment to gun control (Bowerman). González and the other young activists from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School illustrate that regardless of your age, you can still make a difference by raising your voice to seek justice.