

Two girls bouncing a red rubber ball between them on a blacktop playground, a clear day—at first glance, a scene of mirth and childhood, but part of an everyday nightmare for me.

I remember that day, one of thousands of instances that Hayley dictated her world onto mine. She took that standard red rubber ball in her pale, freckly arms and before passing it in my direction, stated an imperative: “If you don’t catch this, you can’t go to Cassie’s birthday party anymore.” She would bounce it erratically in my direction, and though I played soccer and could have easily caught the ball on its first bounce, by that time, I knew better. What would come next, had I caught the ball, would be a look of disdain, and a retort that Hayley’s older brother would come to my house at night and kill me. He had knives, after all. He could do it. I was afraid; I was eight years old.

Over a three-year period, Hayley successfully made herself into my only allowable friend at school with threats and games like these. Every morning as my mom or dad drove me to school, we would turn left onto Pearl Street, and my stomach would drop uncomfortably, a sick, sinking feeling topped off with a prayer to the God of my parents that he would spare me her presence today, please. She was rarely absent from school. My parents did not know. One day, I asked to go over to her house like any normal grade school friend would do, and somehow, I found myself in the hedge outside her house, legs scratched and bleeding, my own living, painful Jackson Pollock. She had told me what game to play and forced me to be the adventurer in the hedge, and I did it, ever-fearing the scary older brother who I rarely interacted with, yet I still believed her every word about him.

It was not the red rubber ball that changed the course of my life from there, but another: a soccer ball. Soccer was a place Hayley could not touch me—a sanctuary where I was free to make my own choices without fear of emotional abuse. There, I met Kali, my soon to be best friend and partner, who was bold enough to fight for my release from Hayley Prison. She staged a fourth-grade intervention, telling Rachael, Hayley’s cousin, that I could no longer be friends with Hayley. Soon

enough, I found myself in a bright room with the school counselor and the four of us: me and Hayley, Kali and Rachael our seconds. “Nicole doesn’t want to be Hayley’s friend anymore,” Kali challenged—and it was as if she spoke the world into being, releasing me all at once from the person who took advantage of my sweet and naïve nature to pull herself up, and put me below her. From this day on, I swore that I would do anything to help those who were in a similar situation. I read, I wrote, I paid attention to the world around me. My beloved favorite animal, the orca whale, found itself on the brink of endangerment? I begged my mom to help me sponsor one with her own money. Daily updates on the war and bombing in Bosnia? I cried, I wrote—in fifth grade, when we were asked to write an “I am” poem, my favorites made it in: whales, school, planets. But the heavier focus? Peace; the Bosnian War, the first genocide in Europe since World War II; worry for the homeless. In a bold proclamation, I typed these words: “I say we can have peace.” Desperate words from a heartfelt 10-year-old, unfortunately still being fought for today.

Meeting Kali had taught me firsthand the help others can give to their fellow humans in difficult situations, and I constantly thought of how I could repay the favor, even though the years of the Hayley Administration left me with a fear of confrontation, a trait I struggle with to this day.

Now, as I reflect on who I am, the core of me can be traced backwards through time, to a ten year old’s vow to help, to an eighteen year old’s only hope for her college degree: to find a way to help people, to a 24 year old’s jump into the unknown world of family support with migrant seasonal farmworkers, to a 33 year old’s desire to reshape state systems towards the social equity she holds in her heart.

I use the experiences I have had as stories replaying in my head to remind me who I am working for every day. On Monday, a small team of three people, myself included, were being pushed to make a decision that would greatly affect many young families in Washington State for years to come. The

person facilitating asked if we were ok with decision as it stood, because we had been mulling over it as a small and larger team of representatives from around the state for about two months already. My supervisor said yes, and I said yes too, though I had a nagging feeling behind my grudging “yes.” Just as the facilitator was starting to confirm and ask for next steps, I was playing some of the experiences I’ve had in work with families from all walks of life through my head: from the parent who had debilitating post-military injuries that affected his life severely, to the hardworking migrant family who made do with spotty transportation and plywood-covered windows, to the smiling faces of their children in class, engaging and learning with the teacher and their peers. I asked us to pause and described how I was feeling about this decision. Speaking up caused this decision to be delayed by at least another month, because we ultimately agreed that we cannot be the sole decision-makers in this case, but that we need to get feedback directly from those who this decision will affect: families.

There are many people and circumstances I can thank for my focus on social equity: my father, a high school counselor, whose work has always centered around kids. One of my best friends, Celeste, who angrily recounted being followed around a local store because she was black with a backpack. My overseas travel, showing me that people from different cultures are more like us than not. The refugee family I am friends with who fled not one, but two countries in search of peace and prosperity for themselves and their children and found poverty and discrimination alive and well in Spokane, WA. And yes, Hayley, who truly craved love, belonging, and power in her life and wielded that craving in the main way she knew towards me, unknowingly helping to shape me into the person I strive day after day to be: caring, equitable, loving, me. Still imperfect, and still me.

In the words of one of the most inspirational leaders I’ve ever admired from afar: “You don’t need a cape to be a hero, you just need to care.” –Kid President