

Julia Kailani Barzilai - First Place Essay

*The Backbone: Under Strain, Yet Unbreakable*

It is time to recognize women not for their historically perceived weakness, but for their undeniable strength. Women require strength to face gender related obstacles in the world: the gender wage gap (exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic), underrepresentation in areas of the workforce, disrespect, objectification, and crippling expectations. Despite this, women are the backbone of society. They always have been. Women who are denied a voice are just as powerful, just as inspirational, as women who break down barriers. History tends to celebrate the trail blazers, the women who visibly change the world, but every woman has a profound impact on the lives of others. Every woman, every person, touches someone else's life by simply living their own.

I come from a family of admirable women. My mom: she is brave, she is hard working, she teaches me how to love life. My maternal great-grandmother was a momentous figure in my mom's life; her name was Bertha "Bluma" Friedman Kohansov. Bertha was elegant and generous, she was clever and she was classy. She immigrated with her family to America as a young girl from "the Old Country" (Halicz, Austria-Hungary), and she was a motivational force in my mom's life, filling the void left by less caring family members. My paternal grandmother, for whom I am named, was a wonder: clever and selfless. She lived in Kovno, Lithuania when the Germans invaded during World War II. She and her brother were sent to live in a Ghetto, and she quickly coordinated her brother's escape from the nightmarish place. The two of them were some of the few who made it out alive. She was then sent to a concentration camp, where she endured indescribable horrors, and she survived. Her relentless perseverance is incredible. I look to the women of my family as role models.

Women who make it into the history books are not the only women who deserve recognition. Many women lead lives of significance by going through the motions of daily life: they are mothers, siblings, friends, daughters, wives, teachers, aunts, and mentors. The common roles which all women play shape the lives of those they support. Every woman can provide guidance and hope to the many people who look up to her. There are women stuck in unhealthy marriages, often at a financial disadvantage, who still find the courage and willpower to carry on. There are women who are overworked, and there are women who are underappreciated. These unsung heroes must be honored because without them the world would be at a standstill; the lives of everyday women are the pillars which hold up the foundation of society. It is time for womens' persistence and effort to be overlooked no longer.

Women provide society with the strength needed to push forward. They are the matriarchs of their families, and they are the support systems of their communities. This essay is a celebration of all women; it is a tribute to women whose voices are suppressed, women who are denied an education, and women who are restricted from making their own choices. This is also a call to action, a desperate reminder to look at an inspirational and impactful woman in your life and say: *thank you*.