

My love for reading started in the 5th grade. I picked up *The Battle of the Labyrinth* by Rick Riordan, not knowing it was the 4th book in a series I had never heard of before. Yet, I was enamoured. The main character, Percy Jackson, and I shared many traits. We both loved the color blue, found peace with the ocean, and had a difficult childhood. In my mind, the only difference was that Percy was a hero. Despite the problems he faced, the demigod and son of Poseidon proved he was strong enough to take on any challenge. I, on the other hand, was a socially awkward kid, often made fun of both in and out of school. On the playground, kids banished me from their groups because as a Filipino I had a “funny voice”. At home, my “funny voice” was too quiet to stop my now-estranged father from shouting slurs at my mother, younger brother and I. I envied heroes like Percy who could speak up with ease.

Once in high school, I met a real, live hero. To be more exact, I met six heroes: my Academic Decathlon team. They were all high school seniors; loud, outgoing and confident seniors. During our team’s annual sleepover, we talked until the early morning about the Ferguson shooting, the Sen. Mark Begich re-election campaign and our shared love for learning. At that moment, I became determined to make my “funny voice” a powerful one.

I began putting myself in new situations, working to strengthen my voice. My junior year, I decided on a new challenge: leading the revival of a student newspaper. I threw all of my energy, excitement and passion into the JDHS J-Bird, hoping that with enough work, the paper would succeed. Yet, I couldn’t rise above all of the present problems. There were moments where I found myself crying in a bathroom stall because I had only gotten three hours of sleep or a teacher told me I couldn’t do it and I should “just give up”.

After the paper’s first print came out, I began to look at myself differently. I was exhausted by the constant challenges in my life. Every failure seemed to affirm that my own life was a failure. I decided to take a break, relieving myself of the newspaper’s duties and other groups I was involved in. Over the next few months, I thought of how different I had become. Although I was not yet where I wanted to be, I felt more alive and willing to stand for what I believed in. Toward the end of the book series, Percy was tired and far from perfect too. I realized that when I was younger, I idolized Percy not because he was able to rise above his problems, but because his

story moved on even when he failed. He was a hero not because he was perfect, but because he struggled. My past Decathlon team too, had struggled before getting to where they were, and I was headed on my way to becoming a hero in my own respect.

Days ago, I attended my first and last ever Alaska Association of Student Governments conference. There, while listening to the different issues students are facing across the state, I was reminded that each one of us have felt the struggle of wanting to be a Percy. Although I knew of my love for politics and public service beforehand, hearing my own story through other teens across the state reaffirmed my identity as a youth advocate. Today, I do see myself as a hero. During the AASG conference, I wrote and passed a resolution with Teen Council encouraging our state to adopt a sexual health education standard. Nowadays, I also write columns through my business, *The Story Sharer*, and I volunteer at the Alaska Legislature to learn how I can use policy to shape our lives. Although there is much I want to do with my future, there is one path I plan to stay on: service. In the future, I hope to continue working for my fellow potential Percys whether it is through politics, social entrepreneurship, law or activism. Whether I am collaborating with an established hero or guiding a 5th grader determined to use their “funny voice”, I will act as the hero I know I am: Tasha Elizarde.