

December 2008

My name is Mary McKenna. I am a high school junior in Garden School. Last week, an assembly was held in the school's gym that opened the eyes of our high school students. Representing UNIFEM, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, Ms. Liv Indreiten stood behind the microphone in the gymnasium and gave a speech none of us could prepare for. The issues of domestic violence, Forced Genital Mutilation (FGM), war rape, and date rape were all addressed, and she proposed that Garden School join a campaign called Stop Violence Against Women. This campaign, with its goal of a million signatures, was launched last year by UNIFEM to work toward stopping the horrible occurrences of violence against women. For every signature, Avon, Johnson & Johnson, and other companies have pledged a donation.

After Ms. Indreiten spoke, the teachers handed out pens and the campaign's postcards to the students. Each postcard with a student's signature was more than just a name. It was a representation of what the students of Garden had learned that day. Although students knew of these issues, they did not know the depth and number of them. Ms. Indreiten's stories made statistics and definitions that seemed so abstract more real. The students heard accounts of people from around the world. As much as people sometimes feel it is better to ignore than to face issues such as these, that is not a choice a leader would take. Because each and every student listened and thought about what Ms. Indreiten was saying, on that one day we had more than 100 leaders in the gym. And because each student was given a chance to change the world with just a signature, it let them know--as I know because I have watched great leaders such as Ms. Indreiten, my mother, Eleanor Roosevelt, and even Mr. Obama--that everyone can make a difference.

We can never stop the real world from happening. The issues of gender-based violence can't stay locked up in the closet anymore. It is an issue I, the teachers, the students, Dr. Marotta, and my family have become involved in, as well as Ms. Indreiten and the many other amazing people who work toward ending this horrendous problem. Everyone can say they think something or want something but that doesn't make it happen. As Walt Disney said, "Somehow I can't believe that there are any heights that can't be scaled by a man who knows the secrets of making dreams come true. This special secret, it seems to me, can be summarized in four C's. They are curiosity, confidence, courage, and constancy, and the greatest of all is confidence. When you believe in a thing, believe in it all the way, implicitly and unquestionable."

My dream is to make the world a fair one. To make these stories of violence aberrational and no more. To make no woman afraid to be a woman. As for the guilty men who have tortured, raped, and killed women, making them afraid to speak out against you, I pray for you. Future days will bring joy to those who protect and love women, and when those days come, your voices will die. Strength of the mind and soul is eternal. Strength of the physical body, however, is temporary. This issue will lose the fight against justice and good but only if we fight it. As **Iyanla Vanzant said about being a woman, "Thank you most of all, not only for our greatness, for our divinity, for our sweetness, for our beauty, for our power." This power can be silenced no more.**

I honor Ms. Indreiten and every single person who signed onto the campaign, for they have the courage to face the truth about what is really happening out there.