

2019 Strong Men and Women Student Essay Contest

Katherine Stenner

Central Region Winner

Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines equality as "the state of being equal." While this is accurate, I find it's insufficient when applied to individuals. I see the word equality as symbolic of the belief that nobody's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is valued over another's; we must fight to give everyone a chance to be equal. This sense of parity is inked in our Constitution, and there are few who understand how to achieve it better than Melody Barnes.

I had the honor of hearing Mrs. Barnes speak at the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia, and it's clear she not only understands the significance of equality, but she recognizes how it's achieved. I asked what equality means to her, and she said, "I think about equality, but I think about equity more. To me, that means giving everyone what they need so they can fulfill their potential." Talking to her made me realize equality is not about just giving everyone the same thing. It's giving everybody the means to level the playing field, and these means differ for each individual. This emphasis on equity changed my perception of how we can achieve fairness. Ensuring equal opportunity is more effective than trying to hold each person above our heads and raise them to the level of someone already on a high dive.

Barnes's comprehension of equality is evident in the work she's done. She worked under Senator Kennedy and President Obama, and during her time in Washington, DC, she focused on domestic policies supporting civil rights, education, and women's health. Her whole career has been about giving people the tools they need to succeed, and when asked what she is most proud of, she said moving discussions towards supporting those who do not "have a seat at the table." Mrs. Barnes has spent her life stimulating discussion about the hard truth that, currently, not everyone in America is created equal.

Speaking out against inequality is everyone's civic duty. For me, that means participating in the Women's March on DC or the LGBTQ Pride March. It also means contacting my representatives, voting in elections, and not letting others' discomfort silence my opinion, because equality is something to be fought for by everyone. The best way to know how to achieve equality is to ask ourselves a question Mrs. Barnes asked me: "How do we become the America we've never been?"



**Strong Men &
Women in
Virginia History**

