

Eastern Region Essay Winner

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“Boys, I only did my duty; the old flag never touched the ground!” Sergeant William Harvey Carney, who was born a slave in Virginia and then moved through life to serve in the Civil War, has inspired many with his bravery during the conflict. Despite being wounded in the battle at Fort Wagner, Carney found the American flag and held it aloft, even though he had to retreat not once, but twice, through enemy lines. Sergeant Carney’s heroism speaks to his sense of pride and honor. Despite the unfair and cruel treatment he may have received from his fellow soldiers, he still honored the American flag and the ideals for which it stood.

Sergeant Carney’s heroism reminds me of the sacrifice my grandfather and uncles made during World War II. They faithfully served their country in the armed forces despite the unfair treatment they were receiving, not at the hands of their fellow soldiers, but at the hands of the American government. I am Native American, a member of the Chickahominy Tribe. My tribe is not yet recognized by the federal government, which essentially means that on paper, the government is saying that my tribe does not exist. The government was more than willing to let my grandfather and uncles risk their lives for this country, but were as not willing to acknowledge their existence.

Despite the circumstances that they were placed in, my relatives rose to the occasion and defended our freedom. There have been many people in history who have risen above their circumstances, but especially people of color. Take Maya Angelou, for example. Her childhood was filled with things no young girl, or child, should have to deal with. The daughter of divorced parents, she was sexually assaulted by her mother’s boyfriend. When she was older, she was forced to support herself and her young son through jobs that many found demeaning. Despite these circumstances, she persevered to become one of America’s greatest poets.

We can all learn from Sergeant Carney and Maya Angelou. No matter what circumstances we are placed in, we have to rise above whatever is trying to keep us down. Staying true to our values, no matter the cost, we must hold high the ideals for which we stand, letting nothing deter us from our goals. We have to look to the future and see that our greatness is coming.