This 15-year-old Made a Film on Greg Louganis and HIV Stigma

March 8, 2019 By Mark S. King

When Ella Johnson made a video documentary about Greg Louganis for her National History Day project, she knew most of her fellow students would be shocked. Ella is a high school freshman in Whitehall, a very small town of the west coast of Michigan. It's not a bastion of progressive thinking.

Ella was right. Her classmates were not exactly enthralled by her choice of topic. But she's used to it.

"My video was met with the usual 'stupid liberal' comments," Ella told me, "but my teachers were very impressed." Ella has a thick skin for a 15-year-old. She has attended the Women's March and proudly sports a "Need to Impeach" sticker on her book bag.

Her video project, "Diving into Murky Water: Greg Louganis & AIDS, a Clear Triumphant Voice for Acceptance," was just posted on YouTube and it gives me all the feels. Yes, it is clearly the work of a journalist-in-training, but the writing is crisp and Ella's storytelling is engaging. (You can watch it above.)

I spoke to Ella via Skype as part of her project, and had to keep reminding myself I was speaking to a teenager (in fact, this is the first time in 30 years of writing that I felt the need to ask for someone's parents to give me permission to post a story). We were not able to reach Greg Louganis for his participation, and I feared that Greg might not ever know about Ella's efforts.

That just changed, when Greg Louganis responded to my email linking to Ella's video. His note read:

> Wow! Brought tears to me eyes. Honored and humbled by this tribute. Blessed and humbled by Ella Johnson's work. I am truly touched!

Namaste,

Greg Louganis

When I shared Greg's response in an email to Ella, I could swear I heard teenage squeals coming from the direction of Michigan. "Knowing he was moved by this," Ella wrote back, "is the greatest reward that could've possibly come out of this whole process."

Judging for the National History Day projects begins next week, but those results seem superfluous at this point. Ella Johnson has her prize, and that is the satisfaction of lifting up a worthy cause and using her young, bold voice to create social change.

That wins all the trophies.

Mark

(Filmmaker, social justice advocate, and high school freshman Ella Johnson can be reached via her Twitter account. I have a hunch some people might want to congratulate her.)

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