

# 2013 KENAN MORAL PURPOSE AWARD

## *Ambition, Joy Liu, Trinity '14*

As a freshman, I applied to nearly every merit-based scholarship Duke offered. There was a certain familiarity to filling out applications I had seen numerous variations of since ninth grade. There was also a certain thrill to the process—the submission, the anticipation, and sometimes if I was lucky enough, the win.

So it's with some shame that I make the following confession: in my three years at Duke, I haven't won anything. I came very close, but never managed to make the final cut. From Baldwin to Robertson, I always received that disappointing rejection after a few interviews. In my perpetual state of being close but never altogether there, I keep coming back to one piece of advice that a fellow classmate confided: "They're looking for people who are doers, who can sell themselves well, who want to change the world. They're looking for ambition."

I didn't seem to fit that mold. I was too soft-spoken to appear bold. I wasn't assertive enough to look like I could lead. Most of all, I never seemed ambitious enough. The goals I articulated never seemed to be big enough for a scholarship program to invest in me. I interpreted these rebuffs as a need to fix a mistake. I began reading voraciously, listening to TED talks during lunch, and attending every lecture I had time for. I became a self-professed subscriber of liberation theology, an admirer of the likes of brazen Jim Kim, and even something of an activist. I thought that this intellectual involvement would result in self-betterment.

Ironically, it was ambition that took me to a rural village on the shores of Lake Victoria the summer after my freshman year. Towards the end of my stay, I met a young boy. Even from the very beginning, I was struck by his depth—the way such wisdom could come from a thin, soft thirteen-year-old child. I saw so much of myself in him—the same combination of naivety mixed with maturity—but I always knew that he was much better than I could ever be, maybe too good for his own good. He couldn't lie, had no clue how to selectively paint a situation to benefit him, helped everyone who asked, and trusted way too much. He baffled me.

I went back the following summer to find him gone, but he called me nearly every day for two months. It was halfway during his second phone call when he lowered his voice and

asked, "Joy, can I tell you something?" In a measured but unwavering voice, he told me that he was being forced to help a family member sell drugs. He had already been hauled in by the police twice (and a third time while I was there), but so far had been let out after bribes exchanged hands. He was missing a considerable amount of school. Even with all this, one of the things he feared most was what I would think of him. My reassurances that circumstance didn't make a person bad seemed wholly inadequate.

For the next nine months, whenever I was asked to make a wish, it was always the same thing, "All I want is for him to be safe." At face value, it seems like such a simple request. But in many ways it's the most difficult one of all because it requires the institutions, forces, and circumstances that bound him to change. That semester, I didn't apply to anything. I felt drained of all ambition. I sat through meetings that talked about producing "worldwide leaders in global health" feeling completely disconnected, because the only thing I wanted was to see this one boy safe, and I couldn't even do that.

Somewhere in the midst of my powerlessness, I realized that I had stopped chasing the buzz words that those scholarship selection committees looked for. Terms like "global health equity" and "social justice" no longer held the same grandness that I had once injected into them. They no longer seemed very concrete or meaningful in the face of human connection. For me, these concepts changed from being an ends to being a means. In the end, I work for him. If being able to lift a finger for him means trying to change the way things are, then that's what I'll work for.

As a graduating senior next year, I imagine that I'll be applying for a post-graduation fellowship or two. But this time, instead of trying to fit a definition of ambitious, I can say with all honesty. "If you're looking for someone who just wants to change the world, that's not me. But if you're looking for someone who has experienced powerlessness, who has felt the weight of the injustices that exist, and who chooses to work for people, then I am the person you're looking for."

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