

A Letter to my Little Sister

Dear Leila,

During these past 4 years of high school, you've had a front row seat to my journey. You've celebrated every big milestone with me, yet the moments that have meant the most are those times when you would just sit in my room, because you felt that maybe I wasn't okay. I distinctly remember one of those times, after Daddy and I talked. You may have heard our conversation, but not have fully understood the gravity of this subject. I have been wanting to talk to you but needed to take the time to make sure I impart to you the wisdom that I gained from this experience. Let me start from the beginning.

On September 1st of 2016 Colin Kaepernick, along with his teammate Eric Reid, kneeled during the national anthem for the first time, exemplifying bravery. Kaepernick told the NFL that he would not, "stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color". They inspired me. As you know, during my sophomore basketball season, my team and I kneeled during the national anthem of every game we played in. As the season progressed, we became accustomed to unapproving stares and some biased referees. However, we were strong, united, and unwavering about our peaceful protest, all the way to the state playoff games.

In my junior year, police brutality and systemic racism rose as the racial divide in our country only worsened, so we continued to kneel. When we returned to the playoffs that year, we learned that we may have to play a high school located in a rural town, notoriously known as a close-minded and intolerant part of Oregon. When Daddy saw the game schedule, he asked me to think about reconsidering kneeling, due to the environment my teammates and I may be

walking into. I was confused. Why was he not supporting me? This, coming from the man who pushes us every day, to lead and not follow. He asked me to tell him what I was kneeling for. I told I was upset that I have to worry about him, every time he leaves the house. That I fear him getting pulled over by the police, then possibly beaten or shot, for being black. Devastated at the thought of him being ripped away from us forever. Angry because people of color, and other marginalized groups are not being granted the things promised in the National Anthem. How can it be the "Land of the Free" when people of color are incarcerated at staggering rates, and immigrants, like my mom, are told to go back to where they came from? How is it the "Home of the Brave" when the people sworn to protect us are the same people unjustly beating and killing us?

Daddy calmly looked at me and said, "You say you're kneeling for me, but have you ever asked me how I felt about it?". I never had. He told me that he was proud of me for exercising my right to protest, but as our dad, he worried for us. He often thought about the incident on a Portland max station two years ago, where a known white supremacist harassed two brown girls who were simply sitting on the train. The incident ended with three white men stepping in, and all were stabbed by the white supremacist, killing two of them and severely injuring the other. I saw the pain in Daddy's eyes as he told me that that could have been us. He asked me, "If a white supremacist was willing to assault three other white men, to harass two brown girls, then what would a white supremacist in their own neighborhood do to a team of brown girls, kneeling in protest?" Streams of tears rolled down my face and I didn't know what to say. I felt sadness, empathy, and understanding for daddy. At first I thought he was trying to stifle my voice, but then I realized he is not telling me not to kneel, he's just asking me to stay focused on my

message and my audience. Will I be heard and am I contributing towards a positive change? Or, am I a distraction to an important message, in front of the wrong audience? He always says to us: "It's okay to experience all of your emotions, but never let them control you". Was I kneeling because I wanted to spread awareness or was it out of spite because I am angry? Honestly Leila, I think I was kneeling for both. I was inspired by Kaepernick's bravery, but I may have also wanted to spite the people in power, to let them know that they can't control me. What exactly were my actions accomplishing?

These questions forced me to think critically about how I have been approaching my activism. Colin Kaepernick kneeling for the national anthem gained international attention, sparking a larger conversation about systematic and institutionalized racism in America. His form of protest was right for him because of his platform and massive audience. My team kneeling in a hostile environment was not going to affect the same kind of awareness as Kaepernick made. I realized that the action of kneeling isn't what is most important, the message is. Kaepernick's message did not stop when the NFL did not sign him to a team. He continued his work by starting his own foundation, donating money to worthy causes, and using his platform to educate people on this issue. My message does not stop outside of the basketball gym. It continues in the clubs and organizations I'm a part of, projects I am passionate about, and the education about race relations that I receive, and in turn, share with others. Moments of public protest are necessary to incite change, but how one lives their life while no one's watching is equally as important!

Moving forward, I will stand or kneel when the moment is right. Whichever I choose to do, I intend to use my emotions to fuel positive change, keep the big picture in mind, and stay

focused on my message and audience. I hope that sharing this experience will help you understand Daddy, in a way that only you and I can. Most importantly, I hope this helps guide you, as you make your own decisions and navigate through similar obstacles in high school. Thank you for sitting with me, when I need you, sis. I will miss that next year.

Love,

Ate (Big Sis in Tagalog)