

Catherine Bevens, Third Place Winner in the Pacific Region
Friday Harbor High School (public); Friday Harbor, WA; Teacher: Gregory Sawyer

To take initiative is to take charge of one's responsibilities and actions. People take initiative every day in making their own decisions, and choosing their own fate. On a larger scale, initiative can be seen in life-changing decisions. One example in American history is the Declaration of Independence. The writers of the Declaration took great leadership initiative in meeting secretly and vowing to break away from Great Britain, arguably the most powerful nation in the world at the time. The Declaration also set the precedent for other initiated changes. In the struggle for women's suffrage, action can be seen in Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who devoted her life to women's rights. Leadership in making decisions and taking initiative is crucial to living one's own life, and promoting the civil rights and values given to us as American citizens.

The Declaration of Independence is a primary example of taking initiative. Leaders of the colonies, realizing that everything was becoming increasingly tumultuous under British rule, decided that change was imperative to improve the lives of the colonists. Together, the Continental Congress, comprised of men of important status, drafted a document stating the reasons why separation from the powers of the British king was essential. In the document, the authors state that "when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security." Knowing things were unacceptable as they stood, the leaders took initiative to declare their independence as a new nation, the United States of America.

Through the leadership of many others who took action, the nation was able to survive and become powerful. As civil rights became increasingly important, Elizabeth Cady Stanton became a focal member of the movement for women's rights. Working towards women's suffrage, with Susan B. Anthony and others, Stanton was active in the promotion of women, not only for their right to vote, but for their rights as individual people. Fighting against the paradigm of male dominance, Stanton believed that women should be perceived as people, with their own rights. She once was quoted as saying, "The prejudice against color, of which we hear so much, is no stronger than that against sex. It is produced by the same cause, and manifested very much in the same way." Believing in the rights of women, just like the rights of African-Americans, Stanton took initiative by uniting with other strong-minded women, and founded the National Woman's Suffrage Association. Also important, Stanton co-wrote the Declaration of Sentiments, a document modeled after the Declaration of Independence, and read it at the first women's rights convention, in 1848. Because the Declaration of Independence was so influential and empowering, using it as an example was both advantageous and courageous. It took a lot of bravery to initiate action to promote women's causes. The concept of women's rights was very difficult for men to accept, especially at that point in history. Although Stanton did not live to see women given the right to vote, her initiative had an enormous impact on progression towards gender equality and women's rights.

In modern times, people take initiative every day. In small tasks, such as assisting an elderly neighbor, or in large decisions made by politicians and world leaders, initiative is a civic value necessary to a functioning society. Personally, I saw the need for better recycling in our school, and took the initiative to obtain a grant to install new receptacles and create an improved recycling program. I am a background leader who initiates change, through tasks both necessary and voluntary, to improve my community. This initiative is a trait I value in myself as well as a trait many others value.

Having the ability to initiate change is a civic value that should not be taken lightly. In some societies, historically and presently, people do not have the power to initiate action to accomplish a task within their own terms. Our nation initiated change when necessary, through the Founding Fathers and the Declaration of Independence, and in other cases, such as taking action to improve the rights of women. Individuals take initiative every day to accomplish tasks of importance, as I did in renovating our school recycling program. In decisions both large and small, leadership and initiative are essential traits American citizens must value.