

Pierce Hansen, First Place Winner in the South Atlantic Region
Fresta Valley Christian School (private); Marshall, Virginia; Teacher: Lisa Hailey

"...One nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all." (The Pledge of Allegiance).

"You shall not wrest the justice due the foreigner..." (The Holy Bible, Deuteronomy 24:17).

Justice is the essential civic value of all Americans. Any person who comes within the borders of these United States is under the jurisdiction of our laws and should always receive full due process of law. Justice for some, or a chosen group, can never be "justice for all". Justice is promised in the Pledge of Allegiance. The United States Constitution enshrines this civic value. The Fifth Amendment to the Constitution states that no person shall be tried except with due process of law. The Fourth Amendment protects against unreasonable searches and seizures and wrongful prosecutions, and the Sixth Amendment guarantees the right to a fair trial and counsel. These Amendments in the Constitution's Bill of Rights together ensure that every person is judged for his acts, and not condemned or freed because of where he was born or who his parents were.

One famous American who believed that justice is the right of every human was William Jennings Bryan, a leader of the Democratic Party and candidate for president in 1896. Throughout his life, Bryan sided with farmers, workers, and faithful Christians, who were being left aside as the nation grew. He believed that America must lead by example, and condemned the imperialism which reduced foreigners to a second class status. After the Spanish American War, he delivered a speech in which he demanded that the citizens of the Philippines be afforded the same rights that Americans cherish. Bryan said, "The nation is of age and it can do what it pleases; it can spurn the traditions of the past; it can repudiate the principles upon which the nation rests; it can employ force instead of reason...it can conquer weaker people...but it cannot repeal the moral law or escape the punishment decreed for the violation of human rights" ("Against Imperialism"). Bryan saw that the temptation to treat different people differently under the law threatened American liberty. He argued for equal justice, and his words apply with the same force that they did over 100 years ago. When, speaking of the Puerto Ricans and Filipinos who were not afforded the rights of citizens, Bryan noted that to "deal with them unrestrained by the Constitution or the Bill of Rights shows how far we have already departed from the ancient landmarks" ("Against Imperialism") of our own tradition of justice.

For the past three summers, I volunteered at a Hispanic community outreach organization. I personally experienced the importance of equal justice applied to everyone. As part of my work at the community organization, I translated from Spanish to English for defendants in criminal cases who needed to tell their stories to their lawyers and judges. Many of the people I met were arrested mainly because they were Hispanic. For example, they were stopped because of burned out brake lights, or objects hanging from their rear view mirrors. Most non-Hispanic persons will never be stopped and interrogated by the police for such minor matters. Others did not understand the legal system. One man who spoke no English pled guilty to a crime simply because he did not understand the proceedings and believed the judge was forcing him to declare his guilt. On another occasion, I actually translated the testimony of a young man in a court hearing because the official translator was sick. I was amazed when I saw that most of the people facing criminal charges were Hispanic, even though they composed a small percentage of the population of the city.

I witnessed the importance of the American civic value of justice. I saw that it is unfair when one ethnic group is singled out for prosecution. I realized that it is unjust when people are tried without having the law explained, or having their side of the story fully told. Our justice cannot depend on whether a person is a citizen or not, or born in the United States or not. A person's origin has nothing to do with the right to a fair trial or freedom from persecution. Equal justice is as much a part of America as its fields, mountains, and rivers. The right to the protections of the Constitution must begin when a person crosses our border. At that moment, the ideal held by our Founding Fathers applies to everyone in America - liberty and justice for all.