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## Literacy Narrative

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# Literacy Narrative

## *Katelyn Whalen*

Tap. Tap. Tap. My sneaker breaks the silence in the room I sit. The only color on the grey walls is the bright cartoonish posters talking about respect and character. Down the hallway the sound of Katy Perry's "Roar" tickles my ear.

I look again at the flier that says, "YMCA Youth and Government;" it was a random flier that my mom was about to throw away before I snatched it from her. I wasn't here to have fun. I wasn't here to learn about government. I was here to put this on my college application.

The door started to creak open, and a short, brunette girl with greasy hair in a hoody appeared. "Hey, you here for YAG?" she asked.

"Yeah, my name's Katelyn. What's yours?"

"I'm Erin and this is my 5th year. I don't know who's coming, so it might just be us."

Ten minutes later I was staring at a mismatched group of people around a table. There was designer-decked sisters Raissat and Rayma, fresh-faced Carson, Erin, and me. We all eventually started to stare at Erin, the only veteran in the room.

"Now I'm not going to lie. This is a hard club. Do I love it? Yes. Will this be tough? You bet, but if we work together we can get this done," she said. That would set the tone for the rest of our time together.

The most fundamental part of Youth and Government is writing a bill. It is the requirement of everyone in the program. You might decide to be a lawyer, lobbyist, or judge in the program, but you will write a bill. Only a week into the program and I heard, "So now we're going to talk about bills. You have to write one just like you would if you were in Congress right now. It needs to have a detailed plan with a clear way to pay for your bill, a start date, and penalties to enforce infractions," Erin said. This is exactly what I didn't want to hear. I was a junior in high school who didn't want to waste the time; I had bigger things to handle.

After the meeting I talked to Erin as we walked outside of the YMCA. “Do we really have to make bills as good as ‘real’ bills?” I asked.

“Katelyn, this isn’t a joke. We’re going to be spending four days in Harrisburg conducting a mock government. This is a rare opportunity. As a representative, if you want to embarrass yourself, and our group, by having a poorly written bill – that’s on you. But really, find something you’re passionate and work for that. It’ll get easier.”

Now I sat at my desk. The white pages were all over, only allowing the dark desk to be seen in snippets or corners. Papers were shoved into shelving, placed under books, crumpled up and dismissed. If anything, this desk was a trash can. Forgotten ideas, broken pens, and empty soda cans were hiding throughout the mounds of paper. Paper that together created a monster. It consumed everything, the desk, the room. I spent most of the time “thinking of topics,” but really looking out of the window.

If anything was an escape from writing, Facebook was such an easy one. As I was aimlessly scrolling past the “If you love Satan scroll by, but if you love the Lord hit the like button,” I saw a post about anti-vaccinations and how it’s so important to vaccinate. Intrigued, I started researching vaccinations. In my research I learned that the study that anti-vaccine believers use was debunked and rejected by the medical world. Having spent a year and a half working in a hospital, I knew that I wanted to write a bill to protect these young children.

The next two weeks I spent endlessly researching for my bill, constructing a compelling argument and pouring over documents. The bright light of my computer screen and I were the only things awake at that time of night. I never liked writing, but here my writing had actual purpose. No longer was this an essay about a book I disliked or an assigned research topic. My words finally had power.

A month into the program I presented the rough draft of my bill. Every word painstakingly chosen; every comma a child. “Wow Katelyn! This is pretty good. I mean, you need to revise, but it’s nice,” Erin said. Now I was one step closer to making change. Harrisburg here I come!

So I went back to the drawing board to craft my masterpiece.

“Ring, Rinnng,” would go the doorbell, but I had to say “No” to hanging out. I was dead-set on getting this right. Hunched over my desk I stayed. Researching through Pennsylvania’s view of vaccinations, other states’ laws, and any legal laws that would interfere and invalidate my bill.

Finally the day had arrived. Everyone was packed for the next four days and ready to take over the government. I had spent the past three months crafting my speech that I would give to my committee and then hopefully the house. My bill was printed in the massive bill book of over six hundred pages. I was ready to conquer.

“Bill #394, Mandatory Vaccinations for School Children by delegate Katelyn Whalen,” the committee secretary said. My moment had arrived. I stood up, approached the podium, and began my two minute speech. Looking at the faces of strangers around me, I was filled with an overwhelming feeling of awe. I knew none of these delegates. We were from around the state, and here we came together. The speech I wrote was my vehicle to convince them of the importance of my bill.

“Parents want to do everything possible to make sure their children are healthy and protected from preventable diseases. Vaccination is the best way to do that.

Vaccination protects children from serious illness and complications of vaccine-preventable diseases

Vaccine-preventable diseases, such as measles, mumps, and whooping cough, are still a threat. They continue to infect U.S. children, resulting in hospitalizations and deaths every year.

Though vaccination has led to a dramatic decline in the number of U.S. cases of several infectious diseases, some of these diseases are quite common in other countries and are brought to the U.S. by international travelers. If children are not vaccinated, they could easily get one of these diseases from a traveler or while traveling themselves.

Outbreaks of preventable diseases occur when many parents decide not to vaccinate their children.

Vaccination is safe and effective. All vaccines undergo long and careful review by scientists, doctors, and the federal government to make sure they are safe.

Organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and the Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention all strongly support protecting children with recommended vaccinations.

Vaccination protects others you care about, including family members, friends, and grandparents.

If children aren't vaccinated, they can spread disease to other children who are too young to be vaccinated or to people with weakened immune systems, such as transplant recipients and people with cancer. This could result in long-term complications and even death for these vulnerable people.

We all have a public health commitment to our communities to protect each other and each other's children by vaccinating our own family members."

As I sat down, there was nothing left that I could do. I had pleaded my case. Now it was time for pro and con debate, where it would now be up to the strength of my bill.

My bill was passed by the committee, the house, and then finally I had to stand by as my senator counterpart Erin presented my bill to the senate. She didn't deliver the speech like I would, but that didn't matter. No one would remember any of the speeches delivered today. The words in the bill were what mattered. Bills that are passed in YAG have an effect on actual state legislation. Many times bills passed in YAG become actual bills several years later. My bill would go on record for years to come. Nothing I said could change the outcome. The written words stood alone.

The pro and con debate waged on. "Mr. President, I don't think we should force our citizens to vaccinate their children. That is entirely within their ability to decide. It's not the government's job to be a parent," said one delegate.

"Mr. President, I disagree with the prior delegate. As a state, we have a commitment to all of our citizens' health. These citizens are our future entrepreneurs, doctors, and teachers. We need to protect our citizens' futures," said another.

Back and forth it went. Every line of the bill was explored until finally it was time to vote. Months of work, hours of research, and it all came down to this.

"When your name is called please say "Aye" or "Nay" to decide on Bill #394, Mandatory Vaccinations for School Children," said Mr. President.

The "Ayes" and "Nays" started to blend together.

“Aye.”

“Nay.”

“Nay.”

“Aye.”

Later I was standing on the mezzanine overlooking the entrances to the House and Senate. The hustle and bustle of the people faded as the sound of polite clapping was heard. I stood beside the YAG Governor and her administration as she signed my bill into law. In a daze I shook her hand. “I’m proud to have this as one of the bills passed this year. Thank you,” she said.

As I walked away to meet with friends, I couldn’t help but notice the history around me. The walls were filled with portraits of instrumental figures in state and national history. The ceilings were vaulted and painted with murals reminiscent of the ancient Greeks. I was surrounded by a rushing current of men and women in suits. Some were state congressmen, some lobbyists, others part of the administration. As much as passion and drive can get you there, I was hit with the fact that those people were in Harrisburg because of words. All the laws of our government are written words that someone wrote. What’s the point of an idea if it cannot be communicated?

Words are the way our world works. At the end of the day, it was my bill that got me here. Each word played a part and was important. I left the Youth and Government with a reverence for writing and its power. Words don’t just fill entertaining books and boring school essays. Words have the ability to shape and to build the world around us. And because of a flyer my Mom did not throw away, I now know that my own words, my own writing, may change the world.