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The Stories that Weave Our Democracy

Theme: What Are the Greatest Attributes of Our Democracy?

My parents came to America in their early 20s with nothing but one suitcase and \$100 in their pocket. Graced with student visas and a goal of pursuing higher education, they wanted a better life in the land of the free. I'll never truly understand the fear they must have faced, packing up their lives to move 7,513 miles from their family. I can't relate to living on a \$90 budget each week, sharing a tiny house with a local family who generously agreed to rent them a room at a discounted price. I can't imagine eating pork parts that a nearby restaurant gave to them for free for a whole two years. Yet looking back, my mother has never characterized her American experience as one of hardship. She has always said, "Every day was filled with hope - a hope that was enough to wake us up every morning." That same hope is what fueled my father as he earned his Ph.D despite broken English and a limited vocabulary. It took them 11 years from the day they landed in this country to finally become official U.S. citizens.

I asked my mother why she kept persevering in hopes of one day becoming an American Citizen. She said: "because to be a citizen is to be a part of democracy," America's democracy where dreams and visions gracefully advance through ballots cast and voices heard. She remembers the excitement of flying for the first time, passport in hand, to the land of freedom. She remembers the day of her naturalization marked with nebulous joy and bittersweet victory. She remembers proudly parading her "I voted" sticker after her first time voting, because America welcomed her to its democracy and she had a say. A say in a country she couldn't originally call home, but now can. A say in their newfound responsibility to help steer the ship of

democracy they'd chosen. She remembers signing the contract to our first American house with tears in her eyes, a small two-bedroom, one-bathroom building, the house she was able to call home. My parents' journey is a testament to the ideals that underpin our democracy. It's a place where every person, irrespective of their origin, has the chance to rewrite their own story.

This opportunity, liberty, equality, and responsibility are what drive individuals to sacrifice their lives to protect. In my quest to delve deeper into the greatest attributes of our democracy, I have also embarked on a mission to explore democracy from the perspective of those who've defended it. Through the Veterans Heritage Project, I had the honor of interviewing a 100-year-old Jewish Navy veteran, Dolly. Despite our 84 year age gap, we bonded over the traits that make us both American. Dolly was only 20 when she first enlisted. As one of the first cohorts of Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) during World War II, she was transported to New York, Oklahoma, and Washington D.C. for rigorous Naval assignments. Dolly's enlistment was initially inspired by her father, a World War I Navy veteran, and even though her Jewish family painfully experienced American anti-Semitism post World War I, she joined 550,000 other American Jews without any hesitation, to fight for justice, human rights and equality. That is the pride of American democracy, a pride to resist aggression and terminate discrimination. She described an era when democracy was threatened, and young Americans like her rallied to preserve it. Dolly underscored that democracy is not just about casting votes; it's about fighting, both physically and literally, for a set of ideals that make life worth living – freedom, justice, and the pursuit of happiness.

People like my parents, the hardest workers I know who will give anything to ensure I have what I need to live out my "American Dream," people like Dolly, a 100-years-old whose age provides no barrier to her relentless passion for our country, and people like me, a 16-year

old who constantly seeks to understand our nation's past and present, in hopes of changing our future, make up *our* democracy. My parents' gratitude to those who uplifted them and Dolly's lifelong dedication to our country motivate me to be an active participant in our democracy. The greatest attributes of our democracy lie in the stories of individuals who strive for a better future, the principles of justice that uphold our society, and the strength that diversity brings to our nation. A beacon of hope, a promise of opportunity, and a symbol of resilience: these are the attributes that make up *our* democracy.