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2023 High School Scholarship Essay Contest
\$1,000 Scholarship Winner

USA Starts with You (and Me)

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We live in a nation characterized by its unique freedoms and a resounding sense of individualism. Capitalism, America's long standing economic system, has served as a key appeal to immigrants and working citizens for the entirety of its history. At its best, this system incentivizes hard work and innovation, and has contributed to an increase of quality of life for Americans. At its worst, it promotes the pursuit of personal interests above all else. In this way, the free market influences not only our economics, but our behavior as well. The American culture as a whole is suffused with an underlying sentiment of individualism. It is our duty as responsible citizens to challenge this characterization and make active efforts to positively impact the world around us.

The core issue of individualism can be seen clearly in the often-discussed "Tragedy of the Commons," which is the idea that in an environment with limited resources, individuals will take more than their fair share if it can benefit them. The issue with this behavior is that acting in pursuit of one's personal interest often hurts the community as a whole, as we've observed countless times in American history. Logging companies have stripped mountainsides bare, racking up enormous profits whilst destroying habitats, increasing flood risk, and hurting the potential longevity of the wood supply as a whole. This disregard for public welfare has also been seen with the unregulated pollution from manufacturing companies during the emerging

industrial age. It was obvious that smog, water pollution, and disease were all increasing because of the reckless operation of factories in the United States, but individual companies had clear benefits in ignoring these consequences, no matter how dire or detrimental they may have been. Eventually, regulatory laws were passed protecting our environment and health. This seems to demonstrate that the cure to the ails of an individualistic society is increased regulation, and while this is true to some extent, we shouldn't have to rely on legal precedents to make reasonable ethical decisions. Massive abuses of power like these wouldn't happen with or without regulations if we as a society, and our companies by extension, were more altruistic and considerate of our impact on the environment and on our fellow citizens.

In collectivist cultures like Japan or South Korea, where there is a much stronger emphasis on interdependency, people are valued based on the efforts they make to contribute to society. In some ways, we follow this logic, but in many ways we as Americans seem to focus too heavily on personal affluence. In America, the word "successful" has become synonymous with "rich." Of course, the individualistic aspect of our culture features amazing advantages like personal freedom and equality of opportunity, but quality of life could improve massively for our nation at large if we were to be more conscious of our impacts on other people. The word "successful" should instead mean leading a life that makes a positive influence on the world outside of the individual.