

Respect: The Choice That Shapes Our World

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Respect is often defined as a feeling of deep admiration for someone or something because of their abilities, qualities, or achievements. To me, respect is more than this. Respect is not simply something you feel—it is something you do. It is shown in the way you speak, the way you listen, and the way you treat others when no one is watching. To feel respected is to feel understood. To feel heard. To feel valued. Respect is rooted in integrity. It is choosing to do the right thing even when no one is watching. It costs nothing, yet it holds incredible power. Anyone, regardless of age, background, or status, can choose to live with respect. It is “free,” yet priceless. It is a choice to honor others and yourself, regardless of past mistakes or circumstances. You do not just feel respect—you demonstrate it daily.

Respect shapes who you become and how you live your life. It influences how people view you and how you view the world. People often respect those they want to be like, which is why it is important to be a positive role model. In a world where negativity can spread easily, choosing kindness and compassion makes a difference. When everyone else chooses disrespect, you can choose to be different. You can lift people up and show them who they can become. In this way, respect becomes leadership.

Throughout history, respect has played a powerful role in shaping communities at the local, state, national, and global levels. In times of war, protest, and social change, respect has helped people come together instead of falling apart. It has encouraged peaceful resolutions, equality, and fairness. Respect fostered trust and helped people work toward solutions rather than conflict.

On a global level, respect has supported diplomacy, peacebuilding, and cultural exchange. When countries chose communication instead of violence, they demonstrated respect for human life and dignity. At the national and state levels, respect has protected freedom and justice. Our ancestors worked tirelessly to establish traditions, rights, and opportunities that we benefit from today. They respected the idea that every person deserves to be treated equally and fairly.

Locally, respect has always been the foundation of strong communities. Families, schools, and neighborhoods grow stronger when people support one another. Respect is not only about people—it extends to culture, traditions, and the environment. We must respect our Earth, our homes, and our resources. Previous generations understood that caring for the land and honoring heritage was essential for the future. Their sacrifices remind us that respect is something we owe both to the past and to the generations ahead.

Respect also begins with the individual. Anyone who wants to make the world a better place must start with respect. When one person chooses to lead with integrity, others often follow. It takes motivation, dedication, and a willingness to serve. This is why character matters so much in life.

The Six Pillars of Character promoted by Character Counts!—trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship—serve as a guide for living with purpose. Each pillar plays an important role in shaping who we become. Respect connects them all. Without respect, trust cannot grow, fairness cannot exist, and caring loses its meaning. Together, these values help nurture resilient individuals who are prepared to make a positive impact.

In the present, respect is more important than ever. We live in a time where opinions are shared instantly and disagreements can spread quickly. Choosing respect requires maturity, intention, and courage. I believe every experience happens for a reason. Every action has consequences, whether good or bad, and every situation teaches us something. What we do today shapes the future we will live in tomorrow. Respect was one of the first values I was taught as a child. I grew up hearing the saying, "Treat others the way you want to be treated." As an 18-year-old, I still carry that lesson with me today. It guides my friendships, my leadership, and my daily interactions. It reminds me to be patient, understanding, and kind.

I also learned never to judge a book by its cover. Everyone has a story. Everyone faces struggles that may not be visible. Respect means seeing the good in people and believing in their potential. It means choosing forgiveness over resentment and compassion over anger.

My faith has shaped my understanding of respect as well. The verse, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34–35), reminds me that love and respect go hand in hand. Even when someone does not respect me, that does not mean I should respond the same way. Instead, I try to walk in grace and uplift others.

However, learning to respect others also required learning to respect myself. I was not always outgoing, and there was a time in my life when I lacked the confidence I needed to succeed. I often doubted myself and questioned whether I was capable of becoming the leader I hoped to be. However, I continued to grow, learn, and remind myself that progress takes time. I learned that it is okay to be a work in progress as long as you never give up on yourself.

Learning to believe in myself taught me that respect does not begin with applause from others—it begins with quiet confidence in who you are becoming. Through this journey, I discovered that in order to be a respected leader, you must first respect and love yourself. Confidence, self-worth, and purpose are the foundation of leadership.

I am still a work in progress, and I always will be. But that journey taught me something powerful: every person is valuable. Every person is worthy. Every person has a purpose. Now, I want to be someone who helps others believe that about themselves. I want to inspire those who feel invisible, uncertain, or unworthy. I want them to know that they are loved, respected, and capable of greatness.

Leadership has transformed my life. At Henley High School, I have had the honor of being in Leadership for four years and serving as student body president for the past two years. Leadership did not come easily at first, but I fell in love with the process and, most importantly, the purpose behind it. I did not join leadership simply as an extracurricular activity. I joined because it became something I embodied. Through clubs, sports, school events, and service projects, I learned how to listen, support others, and lead with empathy. I discovered what it means to be part of something bigger than myself.

Leadership showed me that serving others is one of the highest forms of respect. It taught me responsibility, dedication, and humility. My goal is to be a leader who inspires others, who is selfless, authentic, and understanding. I want to encourage people daily to believe in themselves and in their potential.

My passion for service will continue beyond high school. After graduation, I plan to join either the Air National Guard or the Army National Guard. Joining JROTC during my senior year was one of the best decisions I have ever made. It helped me discover my purpose and strengthened my desire to give back. The military represents discipline, sacrifice, and respect for our nation. By choosing this path, I hope to serve with honor and integrity. I want to respect my country, my community, and those who have served before me. Respect has guided my journey and will continue leading me into the future.

Looking ahead, respect will remain essential to the success of our communities. As society changes and technology advances, human connection must remain at the center of progress. The future depends on individuals who value empathy, fairness, and responsibility. If we continue to practice respect, future generations will be equipped to solve problems peacefully, celebrate differences, and protect the world around them.

Change begins with one person. When individuals commit to leading with integrity and compassion, they create ripples that spread across families, schools, and nations.

Respect is more than a word. It is a mindset, a lifestyle, and a commitment to doing what is right. In the past, it built trust and preserved culture. In the present, it shapes our choices and relationships. In the future, it will determine the world we leave behind. Personally, respect has shaped my growth as a leader, student, and citizen. It has taught me to serve others, stand with confidence, and pursue excellence with humility. It has strengthened my character and clarified my purpose.

Respect is free, yet priceless. It requires no special title—only a willing heart. When we choose respect, we choose leadership. We choose unity. We choose progress. And when we live with respect, we do more than improve our own lives—we help shape a better future for everyone.