

# The Sin of Silence

Category: Speaking Up

written by Ronna L. Edelstein | July 1, 2020

When I was twenty years old, I read Elie Wiesel's 1966 book, *The Jews of Silence*. I learned that silence is a sin—that passively watching something heinous happen without actively speaking out against it is almost as bad as participating in the negative behavior. While this lesson did not result in my joining marches or writing letters to political leaders, it did make me more cognizant of the necessity to speak up when I witness injustices.

When I was teaching sixth grade, one girl dressed like Laura Ingalls of *Little House on the Prairie* fame. Her female classmates relentlessly teased her until I stepped in and invited the “bullies” to have lunch with me in our classroom. After encouraging the girls to chat about generic topics, I led them to the subject that most worried me—their treatment of their classmate. I let them know that they did not have to invite her to a sleepover, but they did have to respect her right to be herself. My voice resonated with the girls; acceptance was achieved.

Later, an eighth-grader transferred from the other middle school in my district to the school where I taught. He was a tall, good-looking young man with an amazing singing voice—perfect for the STAGES program that defined our school. However, when the auditions for *West Side Story*, the annual school musical, were held, the male music teacher—an out-of-the-closet gay man—told me he would not cast this student as Tony because he and several students were convinced that the young man was gay; he thus believed that if he played the love scenes with Maria, it would evoke laughter, not admiration, and make the young actress playing Maria uncomfortable. I spoke up—to the music teacher and the principal—but my protests did not change the casting. The boy who played Tony could not sing, but his popularity protected him from teasing; the boy who could sing endured continued passive-aggressive gay-bashing until he went to yet another middle school outside our district.

These two experiences, among many others, showed me that speaking up does not always create change, but it does perhaps make people more aware that their actions and words have consequences. I will continue to communicate through the ballot box, and I will continue to take a stand when I believe that a situation demands action.

I do not want to be guilty of the sin of silence.

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