

HARPER NIELSEN – WHY I WON'T STAND FOR THE NATIONAL ANTHEM

Harper Nielsen is a 9 year old student from Queensland.

"It took me quite a while before I decided not to stand for the national anthem at school. I started talking with my family about the anthem, and the words in it. We talked about what it might mean to different people, and I started to feel as if Indigenous Australians were being ignored. I thought about the opening lines that say we are "young and free", and that didn't seem right for a country with people who've been here for more than 60,000 years. I did some research and found some articles that talked about how the anthem's word "fair" might have meant advancing Australia for the fair-skinned people who came "across the seas" as colonial settlers. That made it seem even worse.

The more I thought about it, the more it didn't seem right, and when it didn't feel right, standing when they played the song felt like supporting something I didn't believe in. That's not the kind of person I am. I started to think about how it would feel to have everyone around you singing a song that ignored you and pretended your people and their history didn't exist and left you out.

So I talked to my parents and said I was thinking about staying seated while the anthem was played at the next school assembly. They understood my reasons and told me that if I chose to do it, they would support me. They explained to me what the consequences might be. I felt that if this was something I really believed in I should be prepared to deal with the consequences.

That's how it all started.

At the next assembly when we were told to stand for the national anthem I just sat. I thought this was the best way to make my point. A silent protest. I did not really want to be disruptive or force my views on anyone else. I just didn't feel like standing was an honest thing to do. When I didn't stand up a teacher came over to me while everyone else sang along and told me I had to stand. I refused. I didn't mean to be disrespectful. I just chose to stop pretending to support something that didn't seem true.

Every week at assembly different teachers came, telling me I had to stand up or asking me to get up and leave the school hall, but I stayed sitting every time. I explained my reasons, and that my decision was from my sense of social justice. One of my teachers told me that following school rules was more important. I was getting more nervous every week when it was assembly day, and my parents told me I could change my mind whenever I wanted to. But I didn't want to.

Then things got worse.

I was told my behaviour was disrespectful. They told me that ignoring my teacher's instructions to stand could lead to being suspended from school. I was told to write an apology to the people I'd offended. I refused to do this. I didn't think my behaviour was more disrespectful than other people choosing to sing a song that might offend people who are important to us. It didn't change my decision to stay seated for the anthem. If anything, talking to my teachers to try to explain my reasons made me realise how important it was to continue sitting. And it made me want to talk more about my reasons. I was getting frustrated. Adults at school explained to me that they could not let my actions continue without discipline, and that if I felt so strongly I should try other ways of explaining my reasons, such as writing to people who were higher up than they were.

Then what I was doing was on the front page of the newspaper. I never thought that would happen. I wanted people to change things or let me continue sitting, but I didn't want everyone to know about me. When I was in the paper, TV and radio reporters wanted to talk to me and my parents. And then it seemed everyone was talking about it, and lots of people wanted to talk about me and what I was doing. I wasn't surprised that other adults thought I should stand for the anthem, but I was surprised by how much they wanted to talk about it. I was happy that

people wanted to talk about the reasons. Some people have said mean things, like they want to kick me in the butt and have me thrown out of school. It surprised me that adults would talk like that about me. It's not very kind. It doesn't change my mind about what I'm doing.

I really wanted people to think about the anthem, and how we exclude First Nations people. I wanted people to think about racism and how it can look, sometimes in little ways we can't see or didn't think about. I hope that's happened. I also hope people talk to each other about our anthem, and about how we can honour and show respect for Indigenous Australians. So I'm happy I did what I did. And even with the mean things some people have said about me, I'd do it again. I also think we should learn more at school about colonisation and Australia's history, and what it means to different people. We need to understand it for us to be fair to everyone.

I've been asked who inspires me and especially if I've followed Colin Kaepernick, the American football player who knelt down during the national anthem in the United States. I hadn't heard of him before this all happened. I do admire his actions, but they didn't influence mine. I've got some books called *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* by Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo. In one of them is the story of Nobel Prize-winner Nadine Gordimer. She was a white woman who stood against apartheid and helped edit the famous speech by Nelson Mandela, "I am prepared to die". I found her story very inspiring. I'm also inspired by a song that I sing a lot with my little sister. It's called "Naughty" and it's from the musical *Matilda*, by Tim Minchin. It's about being brave enough to be disobedient and go against the crowd when things aren't right.

One thing I've been asked a lot is what I want my actions to show. I want to show that it's possible to change the way we think and for people to talk about things they didn't think about before. I want to show that being kind and thinking about how other people feel when we decide how we do things can make people happier and feel more welcome. I want little people to believe that they can do big things."

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