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**Humanists of Greater Portland 2019 Scholarship Essay**

**“Discuss how Humanist principles could be used to address such issues as the “Black Lives Matter” and “#MeToo” movements.”**

The 2017 TIME Magazine Person of the Year was the Silence Breakers -- the women and men who are finally speaking out about the widespread issue of sexual harassment and sharing stories of the assaults they have endured. This cultural phenomenon began with the detailed accusations of the sexual assault crimes committed by Harvey Weinstein, one of the most powerful men in Hollywood. Silence Breakers, popularized with the phrase ‘Me Too,’ have since taken the media, and the world, by storm. The #MeToo movement is inherently humanist as it is rooted in justice and it fights for the dignity and equality of all people.

‘Was it my fault?’ ‘This happens to everyone!’ ‘Is there something wrong with me?’ ‘He did this because I am weak.’ Victims internalize these thoughts because they are not taken seriously in their accusations, and often are accused of ‘asking for it.’ Our patriarchal society has formed a twisted narrative that makes thoughts like these feel reasonable, even though humanist-inspired critical thinking proves them not to be so. To allow victims to understand this, we must first rearrange the toxic power dynamic that socially permits men to dominate women. Many sexual assaults are committed in the workplace, and the gender gap is a contributing factor. The vast majority of CEOs

and managers in the US are male, meanwhile lower-ranking jobs such as secretarial work are still considered traditionally female. The structure of the workplace is set up for men to hold superiority, and even women with the same job make less than 80% the salary of their male counterparts. This gap has conditioned men to see women as inferior, thus seeing dominating actions as permissible, and for women to believe they must put up with their maltreatment. Luckily, the recent surge of female empowerment and victim recognition has begun the process of changing victim's self-perception.

But the topic of sexual harassment is not so simple. The only way to gain popular recognition is to simplify the issue so the public will latch on, but in doing so we have defeated the purpose of the movement itself. A sound bite of #MeToo will not make a substantial and lasting difference on its own. Instead, the movement must be paired with pushing our government to take a harder stance against perpetrators. We need to attack the root of the patriarchy by raising a generation where men do not think they have the right to a woman's body. We need to back our hashtags with action.

The 'ethical principles of truth and fairness' can be executed through the US justice system. If these values are to govern human actions, then perpetrators of sexual violence must serve sentences that are appropriate to their crimes. A few years ago, college student Brock Turner committed rape, only to serve three months in county jail. His actions permanently scarred the victimized woman, yet he did not face proper retributions. Turner's case brings up many other national issues, namely white privilege.

Humanist values dictate that fairness should rule the justice system, yet white men like Turner consistently receive easier sentences than, for example, black men that commit nonviolent drug offenses. Furthermore, simple reasoning leads to the conclusion that violent acts that directly harm another person's life must be regarded with utmost condemnation. The justice system should pass laws eliminating judges' discretion in meting out sentences for sexual assault, along with minimum sentences, ensures consistent, reasonable punishment that doesn't take emotions and prejudice into account.

Humanist compassion could be utilized to aid victims in recovery. College campuses have very high incidences of sexual assault, but some are also fortunate enough to have a wealth of resources at their disposal. Increased access to low-cost therapy, workshops, and support groups could be incredibly beneficial for victims to ease back into their normal lives. In fact, colleges could use their power to lower assault rates in the first place. Long term, the only way to end rape culture in this country is to educate young men and dismantle the construct of toxic masculinity by teaching them to respect all human beings, women included. This should begin with very young boys — teaching them the inherent equality of all people, before they absorb the pervasive cultural attitude of patriarchal superiority.

Humanist beliefs center around the 'dignity and worth of each human being.' At its core, the #MeToo movement is the same -- it aims for women to be treated with the dignity

they deserve. For far too long, female voices have been overshadowed by men's, even silenced. #MeToo gives women a platform to finally tell their stories.