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Monterey Trail High School
11th Grade
First Place

I used to come to elementary school early in the morning. I would leave my house hours before the gate was open, walk over the lunchroom, and Mr. Phong, a janitor who had familiarized himself with my spectacular grasp of punctuality, would always let me in. These valuable hours in the lunchroom by myself not only provided me with ample time to do my homework, but allowed me the privilege of getting to know Mr. Phong, the friendly janitor who's wealth of knowledge stretched far past his at times demeaning job title.

Before school started every day, Mr. Phong unfurled a rather large banner above our stage sporting an owl and our school motto, the banner read "Knowledge is Power." Every Tuesday we had little assemblies in the morning where our slow witted principal would ironically try and beat it into our head that knowledge was indeed, invaluable strength that no one could match. But each time he spoke, I saw what knowledge wasn't. Knowledge wasn't a suit and tie, a 6 figure paycheck and a degree from Stanford. Knowledge wasn't found in books and worksheets. Knowledge couldn't be learned, or at least not before it was understood.

Mr. Phong and our principal were two polar opposites in every way. While our principal pointed to books and told us that knowledge was littered through the pages of a 6 year old, recycled textbook, Mr. Phong knew better, he knew that true knowledge, was found within yourself. While Socrates and Mr. Phong might have a slight gap in terms of their status in history, I believe they were actually very much alike. Socrates saw the value in knowledge and saw it as the good in mankind. Mr. Phong also knew the value of knowledge and saw good in every kid that exhibited it, from the straight A students to the misfits, the kids that had already been written off, pegged as lost causes with no potential, which brings me to the next point, ignorance.

Through his daily duties cleaning up after 10 year olds, Mr. Phong had almost no choice but to remain humble. Through this, he taught me the true evil of ignorance. I would sometimes help out Mr. Phong with his janitorial duties, and I began to see that it was a very hard job. I began to see the unintentional evil of the kids, and even some of the staff that downplayed the role of the custodian. I mention that it was unintentional because malice and intent were not behind a student's jeers

and taunts. And while it may have appeared rather malicious, Mr. Phong would brush it off, knowing that the true evil was not the unkind words, but the uninformed mind. The fact that the kid didn't know bothered Mr. Phong more than anything. By not knowing, by being un- or misinformed, you lose the power to think for yourself, and by knowing, researching, and being informed, you gain the power to think for yourself, the power of knowledge, which truly is the greatest power. While knowledge does not always result in good decisions, it results in decisions that are informed and have been thought out, and those, are the best decisions you can make.