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## The Walkout

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Lucy Lansdowne

Second-Place Winner

Short Essay Category

2019-2020 Emerging Writers Contest

### The Walkout

On February 14, 2018, a shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, resulted in seventeen deaths. Only days after, students from the shooting organized a campaign to end gun violence. During their campaign, a walkout was scheduled to take place in schools one month after the shooting. Along with hundreds of other students from my school (Walton High School), I made a commitment to join the walkout on March 14, 2018. However, little did I know that Walton and the Cobb County School District were not going to make it easy for us.

The walkout was supposed to be peaceful and short: seventeen minutes for the seventeen people who were killed. A small group of Walton students stepped forward to lead it. They set up a sign-up through social media and began communicating with the school's administrators. As hundreds of students, almost 2,000, started signing up, Cobb County School District began making it clear that not only did they not agree with the walkout, but they were planning on punishing the participants. We watched as hundreds of school districts nationwide gave their full support to their students, allowing teachers, students, and administrators to walk out together, where as we were issued harsh warnings about what would happen to us if we proceeded with our plans. The district threatened everything from Saturday school, in-school suspension, and out-of-school suspension to removal from various honor societies and taking away our ability to

exempt finals if we chose to participate. The list got longer as the walkout got closer, and the district made it clear that they would not actually decide how we would be punished until the walkout was over, leaving students in the dark. As the situation became more tense, Richard Pellegrino, an attorney for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (an African American civil rights organization), contacted the leaders of our walkout with an offer to help the students understand our rights to protest peacefully on school property. Mr. Pellegrino, a civil rights attorney, had a unique point of view because he had a daughter at Pebblebrook High School who was planning on attending the walkout. He held weekly conference calls in which high school students from all over Cobb County were able to discuss what the county could do, and could not do, legally.

As the resistance from the Cobb County Board of Education grew and more vague possible punishments were threatened, students rapidly started dropping out. Leading up to the event, our principal had sent numerous emails and phone calls telling us what might---or might not--happen if we left class for seventeen minutes. The potential long-term ramifications of being punished for a seventeen-minute walkout were a little scary. For example, would a suspension on a senior's previously clean high school record prevent her from being accepted to certain universities? What would happen to a junior who might be struggling to maintain a passing grade in a class to lose his ability to exempt his final exam? Of the almost two thousand students who originally planned to walk out of Walton High School, only about 200 ended up actually doing it. I, too, was unsure if I would still do it until the day of the walkout. What was supposed to be a peaceful, quiet protest and event to honor the people killed was becoming a civil rights issue that was going to result in a disciplinary action on my record. Not only that, none of us were unsure how the day was going to unfold, and at times, it was frightening to consider what might go

wrong. Mr. Pellegrino told us that we needed to be prepared for the fact that a teacher or administrator might physically try to prevent us from leaving our classrooms or our school. If that happened, he instructed us that under no circumstances were we to resist. However, he also firmly told that we should immediately start recording the situation on our cell phone. He gave us careful instructions to remain respectful of the classes that were in progress while we were exiting the school. He informed us several times that we should remain absolutely silent, with no chanting or even talking, because Cobb County's legal reason for preventing us from, or punishing us for, protesting was because those seventeen minutes would constitute a "disruption of the normal school day." In an e-mail Mr. Pellegrino, reminded us that "...there are sometimes consequences suffered as a result of non-violent, civil disobedience, and protest, and [...] we will all work together to mitigate those consequences so that the least harm, if any, is done to our brave students who are participating in this noble initiative."

On the day of the walkout, we were aware of our rights and hoped we knew what to do in almost every situation that might occur. The only thing we were unsure of was what our punishment would be; we all expected the worst. I almost did not leave because I was worried my physics teacher would consider it disrespectful for me to leave her class, when so many other students remained. I had no idea whether she supported us or not. My mom was texting me as it got closer to time to leave, and she offered to e-mail my teacher right then to let her know that I was not intending on being rude by leaving her class in particular. She wrote this back to my mom, who passed it on to me: "I support personal choice in all things. Please tell Lucy I respect her decision, and I hope that this and other activism brings about real change in our laws!"

At 10:00 a.m. on March 14, 2018, I stood up, along with several other students in my class, to walk out of school. My physics teacher also stood and announced: "I have been

instructed that I am to prevent you from leaving this classroom. However, as you can see, there are two doors in this classroom. But there is only one of me. So I'm going to stand next to one door, and you can figure out what to do next." I was nervous. I eased up a bit seeing other students coming into the hallways, all completely silent as we headed toward the exit. Teachers were told by administrators to go out into the hallways, supposedly to ensure that we would not cause any disruptions. As they formed a line from one end of them hallway to another, my uneasiness grew. But then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw that one of them, and then several of them, had begun silently clapping for us as we filed past.

I saw a friend in the hallway, and we made eye contact as we joined each other but said nothing. As we all walked onto the football field, which we had been warned might be locked by administrators, forcing us to leave campus, we streamed in silently as one of the organizers got a headcount. We huddled up on the field. As each of the seventeen minutes went by, the leaders quietly and slowly announced one name of a person who was killed. I was overwhelmed with sadness hearing this and seeing pictures of them around the field. I looked around and saw some people crying because they personally knew some of the students. This made me realize even more why what we were doing was so important. The organizers then gave us the phone numbers of our state local representatives and signs were up everywhere, giving us some suggestions on what to say. I had never called a representative before. Even many of the students' parents had never called a representative, so many of us were nervous but committed to making the calls. Rather than being disruptive, as predicted by our school system, we were honoring lives that were lost and taking action. After I made a call, I felt proud, and the overall feeling among the students was that at least we were trying to make a difference, even though we were only teenagers.

While we were calling, we heard noises getting louder overhead. As I looked up, I saw helicopters circling the sky and police officers surrounding the field. My mom texted me and said Walton High School was live on CNN, being singled out as an example of a school where the student walkout was not being supported by the school district. She said she could see all the students on the field, as well as parents who were gathered with signs in front of the school. It was hard to believe I was in the middle of this. Soon, the leaders announced that the student phone calls had filled the representatives' inboxes to capacity. A cheer went up, and we were instructed to go back to class quickly.

A few days later, while taking an AP Human Geography test, someone knocked on the door and asked to see my friend and me. We knew what it was about. As my teacher walked outside the classroom and closed the door, we could hear him saying that the administrator would have to wait until the next class to pull us out or until we finished our test, although we realized that the administrators could insist we come and miss our test. My friend and I turned to each other and smiled and shrugged our shoulders, realizing there was no turning back now. We were proud of ourselves for sticking up for what we believed in.

Once I was done with my test, I headed to my next class and received a note from my teacher saying I needed to report immediately to an administrator's office. When it was my turn to come into the office, I sat down and was told I would be receiving a day of in-school suspension, but that it would not be on my permanent record. Ironically, I ended up missing my entire French class, which was 50 minutes long, waiting for the administrator that day, and I missed an entire day of school while in suspension, while the walkout was only seventeen minutes.

When I received my suspension form and was told I could leave, my friends and I took pictures of ourselves, proudly holding up our pink forms. I also showed my pink slip to my family, who said they could not be more proud of their “suspended delinquent.” The day before my suspension, I had to inform my teachers I would be absent. Many of them said they were proud of all the students who walked out, while others said nothing.

On the day of ISS, hundreds of students were squished into the auditorium. We did nothing but homework the whole day, with a short twenty-minute lunch break and a certain number of bathroom breaks. We were not allowed to use our phones or to talk. Although it was a long and boring day, most of us were in high spirits thinking of what we had accomplished.

Participating in the walkout showed me I could stand up for myself and take the consequences. It was a life-changing experience for me and made me more aware of everything going on in the world around me. I never regretted doing the walkout because I knew I was not just saying I was tired of students being shot at school. I was trying to do something about it and show support for the students and staff of Marjory Stoneman Douglas. I have never been the type of person to not follow the rules. I do not like to draw attention to myself, and I have never been in trouble at school. The fact that I was part of the 10% of Walton students who still decided to walk out of the school in the face of intense pressure from the Walton and the Cobb County Board of Education still makes me proud. In an e-mail Richard Pellegrino sent to us a few days after the walkout, he included this quote, which summed up my feelings better than I could: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world” (Margaret Mead).