

00:10

My mom is a strong black woman who raised her kids to have the same sense of strength and pride. This spirit was epitomized by a single wall in our small, two-bedroom apartment on the South Side of Chicago. Two pictures hung proudly: one larger-than-life photo of my siblings and I and the other a picture of my mom at 12 years old staring into the eyes of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

00:35

When I was younger, I used to stand on my tippy-toes, stare at that picture, close my eyes tightly, and just pretend that it was me gazing up at the man who revolutionized the Civil Rights Movement, who marched on Washington and who transformed a generation by his words, "I have a dream."

00:51

But I did get to meet him. Now, obviously, I didn't meet Dr. King, but I met a man named Dr. Vincent Harding. He worked with Dr. King from day one and even wrote some of his most iconic speeches. You see, this was a really important moment for me as a kid, because it was the first time that I realized that it wasn't just Dr. King who led this revolution, but he was surrounded by a movement made up of anonymous extraordinaries.

01:16

Anonymous extraordinaries are people who work selflessly and vigorously for what they believe in, people who are motivated by conviction and not recognition. It took me a long time to realize the significance of this moment, until I was much older.

01:29

And like I said, I grew up in Chicago. I grew up in a rough, poor neighborhood, but it didn't really matter to me as kid because I literally have the most incredible family in the world. Two things that I did struggle with a lot growing up was one -- that my dad has been sick my whole life. He suffers from Parkinson's and pancreatitis, and as a kid, it was so hard for me to watch my hero in so much pain. And my other issue was with me. I guess you could say I had an identity crisis. I had to move four times during high school, and my freshman year I went to an extremely racist high school. Kids were so cruel. They gave us hate letters, wrote terrible things on our lockers and because I'm biracial, they would tell me, "You can't be both. You have to choose, black or white." And in the end I just resented being either. And then all of a sudden, my senior year rolls around, 2008, and being mixed, being racially ambiguous is this new cool fad, like,

"Natalie, now it's OK for you to like you. You're pretty now." I was over it. I was tired of caring about what other people thought and I just wanted to hurry up, go through my classes, whatever school I was going to be at next, and graduate.

02:32

It wasn't until I was 17 and I saw a film called "Invisible Children" that something happened. Child soldiers, children as young as my nephews being abducted, given AK-47s and forced to kill, not just anyone, but oftentimes forced to kill their own parents, their own siblings -- a rebel army committing mass murder for no political or religious reason, just because. 25 years. 25 years this conflict has been going on. I'm 20 years old, so that makes this conflict five years older than me. One man, one man with one charismatic voice, started this whole thing. His name is Joseph Kony.

03:19

When I saw this film, something happened. Something started kind of stirring inside of me, and I couldn't identify what it was. I didn't know if it was rage, if it was pity, if I felt guilty because this was the first time I'd heard about a 25-year-long war. I couldn't even give it a name. All I knew is that it kicked me off my ass and I started asking questions. What do I do? What can one 17-year-old do? You've got to give me something.

03:42

And they gave me something. The founders and filmmakers at Invisible Children told me that there was this bill, that if we could just get this bill passed, it would do two things: one, it would apprehend Joseph Kony and the top commanders in his rebel army, and two, it would provide funding for the recovery of these regions that had been devastated by 25 years of war. And I was like, done. Let me at it. I swear I will do whatever I can to make this happen.

04:05

So myself and 99 other idealistic 18- to 20-year-olds hopped on a plane to intern in San Diego with Invisible Children. I was postponing college. We weren't getting paid for this and you could call it irresponsible or crazy -- my parents did. But for us, it would have been insane not to go. We all felt this urgency, and we would do whatever it took to pass this bill.

04:29

So we were given our first task. We were going to plan an event called the Rescue of Joseph Kony's Child Soldiers where participants would come in a hundred cities worldwide and rally in their city center until a celebrity or a political figure came and used their voice on behalf of these child soldiers, and at that point each city was "rescued." But the catch was, we weren't leaving the cities until we were rescued. I was given Chicago and nine other cities and I told my bosses, I was like, "If we're going for big-name people, why not go for the queen bee? Right? Why not go for Oprah Winfrey?" They thought I was a little idealistic, but I mean, we were trying to think big. We were doing an impossible thing, so why not try to reach more impossible things? And so we had from January to April to get this done.

05:11

This is the number of hours that I spent on logistics, from getting permits to rallying participants and finding venues. This is the number of times that I was rejected by celebrities' agents or politicians' secretaries. That is amount of money that I spent personally on Red Bull and Diet Coke to stay awake during this movement.

05:33

(Laughter)

05:34

You can judge me if you want to. That is my hospital bill from the kidney infection I got from an overconsumption of caffeine due to this event.

05:43

(Laughter)

05:44

These were just some of the ridiculous things that we did to try and pull this event off.

05:48

And so April 21 rolls around and the event begins. A hundred cities around the world. They were beautiful. Six days later, all the cities were rescued but one: Chicago.

05:58

So we were waiting in the city. People started coming from all over the world, all over the country to be reinforcements and join their voice with ours. And finally, on May 1, we wrapped ourselves around Oprah's studio and we got her attention.

06:12

This is a clip from a film called "Together We Are Free" documenting the rescue event and my attempt to get Oprah.

06:20

(Video) Oprah Winfrey: When I drove into the office, there was a giant -- when you came in, was there a group outside?

06:25

Crowd: Yes.

06:26

OW: Holding up signs asking if I would talk to them for just five minutes, so I was happy to do so. And they are with a group called "Invisible Children," and I told this group outside that I'd give them a minute to state their case.

06:41

Man: Oprah, thank you so much for having us. Basically, these folks out here have seen the story of 30,000 children abducted by a rebel leader named Joseph Kony. And they're out here in solidarity, and they have been out here for six days. This started 100,000 people worldwide. Now it's down to 500 standing strong so that you can raise the profile of this issue and we can end the longest-running war in Africa and rescue those kids that are child soldiers still in East Africa. Oprah, I have to say this girl Natalie here, she's 18 years old. She was an intern for us this year, and she said, "My one goal is to get Oprah." She had 2,000 people come out on Saturday, but it rained. She stood here in the rain with 50 people. When they heard she was here, hundreds started coming. People are here from Mexico, Australia. Natalie's 18. Don't think you're too young. You can change the world any day. Start now. Start today.

07:39

(Cheers)

07:45

Man: Was it worth it?

07:46

Crowd: Yeah!

07:50

Natalie! Natalie! Natalie!

07:55

(Music)

08:01

Together we are free! Together we are free!

08:09

(Applause)

08:14

So you would think that this is the moment in my life, the pinnacle that made me an extraordinary. And it was an awesome moment. I mean, I was on top of the world. Ten million people watched the "Oprah Winfrey Show." But looking back, that wasn't it. Don't get me wrong. Like I said, it was great moment. It made for a heck of a profile picture on Facebook for a week.

08:33

(Laughter)

08:35

But I had been extraordinary all along, and I wasn't alone.

08:38

You see, even though my story was featured in this film, I was just one of a hundred interns who worked their tails off to make this happen. I'm up in the air, but the guy that I'm sitting on his shoulders, he's my best friend. His name is Johannes Oberman and Johannes worked with me from day one in Chicago, just as long hours, just as many sleepless nights as I did. The girl on the right, her name's Bethany Bylsma. Bethany planned New York City and Boston, and they were seriously the most beautiful events that we held. The girl on the left, her name's Colleen. Colleen moved to Mexico, moved, for three months, to plan five events there, only to be kicked out the day before the events because of the swine flu. And then there was this family. This family, they didn't get to come to the rescue. They couldn't make it out, but they ordered a hundred boxes of pizza for us, delivered them to the corner of Michigan and Randolph where we were all silently protesting. You see, it was people like this doing whatever they could, simultaneously, single-mindedly, without a care to who was watching, that made this happen. It wasn't about us getting on Oprah, because when I got down from their shoulders, the war hadn't ended. It was about that bill. Oprah was just a checkpoint on the way to that bill. That bill was the point. That bill is what we had our eyes set on from day one. That was going to help us end Africa's longest-running war. And that is what brought a hundred thousand people out to the rescue event from around the world.

10:04

And it paid off: 10 days after we were on Oprah, the bill was introduced into Congress. A year after that, it got unanimously 267 cosponsors in Congress. And then one week after that, President Obama signed our bill into law.

10:24

(Applause)

10:32

And none of us interns got to be there. We didn't get to be there in this moment. Our founders were there. They're the guys cheesing in the background. But that moment right there is what made all of it worth it. It's what a hundred thousand anonymous extraordinaries worked for so hard to make that happen.

10:51

You know, the Oprah moments, they prove that the supposedly impossible can be done. They inspire us. They boost our confidence. But the moment isn't a movement. Even a lot of those moments strung together don't fuel a movement. What fuels a movement are the anonymous extraordinaries behind it.

11:08

You know, for me, what kept me pushing on through the rescue was the thought of those child soldiers. It became personal. I was able to go to Africa at one point. I met these incredible people. I have friends that have been living in this conflict their entire life, and it was personal to me.

11:22

But that doesn't have to be what drives you. You know, you may want to be the next Shepard Fairey or the next JK Rowling or the next whoever. It doesn't matter, but whatever you want, chase after it with everything that you have -- not because of the fame or the fortune, but solely because that's what you believe in, because that's what makes your heart sing. That's what your dance is.

11:45

That's what is going to define our generation, when we start chasing and fighting after the things that we love and that we want to fight for.

11:52

I cared too much in high school about what people thought about me. That's what so awesome about this conference, is so many of you are so young. Find that thing that inspires you that you love, and just chase after it. You know, fight for that, because that is what is going to change this world and that is what defines us.

12:08

Despite what people think, my Oprah moments, my being on TED, doesn't define me, because if you were to follow me home to LA, you would see me waiting tables and nannying to pay the bills as I chase after my dream of becoming a filmmaker. In the small, anonymous, monotonous every-single-day acts, I have to remind myself to be extraordinary. And believe me, when the door is closed and the cameras are off, it's tough. But if there's one thing that I want to drive home to you, one thing that I can say, not just to you but to myself, is that it is the acts that make us extraordinary, not the Oprah moments. Thank you.