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A Reflection on Bryan Stevenson’s “Just Mercy”

Many years ago, the country of Burma was a cruel place for those of the Muslim Faith as they were the minority group. The Buddhist majority denied the Muslims citizenship and voting rights. It got to the point where homes of Muslims were being burned down. Three victims of this cruelty escaped, running to the nearby country of Thailand. Residing within a refugee camp, they built their own shelter and waited for a chance to be relocated to a new country.

More than 17 years passed and the odds of falling within the 3 percent of those who were to get relocated seemed dismal. Then, as abruptly as they had arrived, this trio was relocated to Rochester, N.Y. Soon after the three arrived and found a place to live, these Burmese were robbed, tied up, and beaten by men in ski masks. Both the mother and father sustained permanent injury and the few possessions they still had were stolen. Then they moved to Buffalo, N.Y., and met my grandmother.

Because of the culture and language barrier, landlords, medical personal, and the police neglected and took advantage of the refugees. My grandma, through a nonprofit organization, was only supposed to help them for a few months; for the last few years, however, she has been their go-to for almost all problems.

As did Bryan Stevenson, she helped them receive fair treatment in an environment that didn’t understand them. My grandmother helped negotiate fair rent and conditions with landlords, helped Muslim immigrants gain U. S. citizenship, and recently — in striking similarity to the actions of Bryan Stevenson, helped get one of them out of prison.
Bryan Stevenson put the plight of people such as the Burmese in focus. His main argument that people are the product of their environment explains why these refugees are shaped the way that they are. It was one thing to learn the mentality of the characters in “Just Mercy,” but to be able to delve into the mindset of people who are right in my community was even more thought provoking.

Learning of the bomb threats and the harassment Bryan Stevenson faced made me view my grandmother in a new light. She must be so strong to fight oppression, just as Bryan Stevenson was. “Just Mercy” also made me appreciate the encounter that I had with a Burmese family. When inadequate living conditions forced the family of now 20 to move, my grandma brought me along to help. I saw firsthand how an entire family fit into a small house held up by a few beams. The house they were moving to was not much better but they seemed so hopeful and grateful. The father shook my hand at the end of the day and told me, “You are welcome in my home anytime.”

It is moving to know someone, my grandmother, who helps break cultural oppression. While Bryan Stevenson and my grandma advocate for different groups, their effect is the same: They both help level cultural playing fields.