**3. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again? (650)**

We won’t win. We’ve tried. It’s just the politics. As I walked out of the robotics shop room, these three statements kept bouncing around my head. It seemed that most of my team had figured we were the losers. I didn’t blame them.

With a small team size of about 30 students, our school could hardly compete with the larger “Silicon Valley” schools, which had robotics programs with infinitely more resources than our own. Looking at their sponsors, names such as Google and NASA popped up, while we had our Padre Parents and Carmel Video. For almost the entire history of our participation in the robotics competitions, these large schools had dominated with their complex bionic arms and object tracking vision computer programs. So how were we to get the recognition we deserved?

I joined the robotics team during freshman year, and for me and countless others, it’s decidedly been one of the most significant influences in our decisions to pursue engineering. I remember being taught how to lathe a part for the first time by the seniors and scratching my head in wonder as I discovered how simply code was linked to reality with just 1s and 0s. From the initial steps on the drawing board to strategizing on game day, I discovered the value of teamwork, where the cumulative whole can accomplish far more than any one individual. It wasn’t long before I looked forward to the last school bell, not because my school day had ended, but because my learning had just begun. Like the bright flash from a welding torch, my inspiration and appreciation for engineering was ignited.

However, when the robotics competitions came around, we were constantly reminded of our technical inferiority, and our phrase, “all student-made”, became less frequently uttered around the arena. As competition increased, mentor-to-student ratios of heavily sponsored teams veered suspiciously high as they became comprised of more adults than students. It then occurred to me that my team’s efforts were being undermined and hidden under the shadows of teams that bought their successes. During the following season, I spent many nights procrastinating on my chemistry homework to research the requirements of the Chairman’s Award, the most prestigious distinction in the robotics competitions bestowed to the team that best spreads STEM throughout their community. The required essay, video, and panel interview seemed like small obstacles in the midst of my passion to prove my team’s worth.

Yet my own team was skeptical of the cause. Applying for the Chairman’s Award was not a new course of action. It seemed as if the winning teams were the ones that could afford their own trip to Honduras to find partnerships. Despite these observations, I continued to believe that our team had potential. Since my freshman year, we started seven new teams in fellow high schools, hosted demonstrations for the youth, and assisted the elderly with technology. We weren’t the ones winning and getting sponsors, but we were the ones giving it our all, and that is a success of its own charm.

You could say my faith in humanity was restored when the judges recognized this and announced us as the winners of the award; however, while it feels nice to have made Carmel Robotics history, it is far more significant to me in the way I let my team realize their ability to change their chances of success not through access to resources or sheer size of school, but through persistent and meticulous hard work. In many ways, the battle to defy the small school with little resources stereotype continues to this day. Even if I hadn’t applied for the award, I’d still push as the co-captain of my team to continue promoting outreach because, unlike our Silicon Valley counterparts, it’s not about the winning, it’s about letting people experience the same wonders that I had my freshman year.