

Lee Bloom essay

Richard C. Goodwin-Josiah DuBois Humanitarian Award

In the ice hockey locker room, the rules of polite conversation don't apply. Within the gassy mass of putrid smells, kids say shocking things, all in the name of getting hyped up for our games. The banter can be hilarious, and often somewhat off-color, but never in all my years of playing for Cherry Hill East did anyone say anything so offensive that it stayed with me after the final buzzer. That is until 7th-grade when one of my teammates crossed the line.

Joey was an eighth-grader and one of the oldest on our middle school team. For weeks, he went around the room screaming "Jew!" at random teammates. I guess he thought he was funny. With several Jewish players on the team, including my brother Ravi and me, we changed in uncomfortable silence and brewing anger as Joey ranted. I could not let this last. I knew I had a duty to my community to stop him. After talking it over with Ravi, we went to our parents to explain the situation. We asked them to contact the coaches and make them aware of the situation. We did not want Joey to be taken off the team, but we wanted him to understand why it is unacceptable to taunt people for being different, even in a joking way. He never did anything like this again.

This was the first time I felt compelled to speak up, and I'm so glad I did. Like Josiah DuBois, I could not remain a bystander to hate. While I did not know who he was at the time, DuBois lived through me as I stood up to a bully, preventing Joey's harassment from spiraling into something worse.

Josiah DuBois should be a household name. Writing this essay, I only now realize the importance of the man whose memorial road I pass by every day on the way to school. His commitment to saving Jews from mass slaughter during the Holocaust – despite confronting virulent antisemitism at high echelons of the U.S. State Department and death threats for doing the right thing – is astonishing. He serves as a reminder that one single person with a devotion to justice can have an invaluable impact on history.

Researching DuBois, I find that my life has many parallels to this fellow South Jersey native. While standing up to antisemitism is something I will always do, my focus right now is on environmental justice. Like him, I feel my life purpose is tied to taking a stand for what I believe in. Successfully shutting down Joey in the locker room all those years ago was not a fluke. Coming from a community that values justice for everyone, I am proud of the many efforts I have been involved in to raise awareness for just causes.

With my family, I have been involved in an environmental justice project to bring fresh healthy food to Camden residents. For years, through our synagogue, we have volunteered at the Urban Garden at The Neighborhood Center. Here, we plant, seed, harvest and otherwise work with Camden residents and local community groups to promote sustainable practices. The food produced is given to families in need.

In January, I participated in a perspective-changing weekend seminar through the Religious Action Committee of Reform Judaism in Washington, D.C. called L'Taken, meaning to correct or repair. I learned about the process and techniques of lobbying lawmakers for a variety of social justice issues, with a focus on climate change. I had an incredible opportunity to advocate for the Environmental Justice for All bill. Delivering speeches on Capitol Hill was a powerful experience that further fuels my desire to protect the environment and ensure a just, safe and healthy future.

My mother's involvement in social justice work through our synagogue opened my eyes to the joy of helping people in need. It has shown me how much need there is for people like Josiah DuBois. She introduced many Jewish values to me such as giving back to the world, helping our community, and fighting for what we stand for. And she taught me to act on our values. Among my favorite memories from childhood, we attended a gathering with Syrian refugees at our beloved museum/playhouse, the Discovery Museum. Here, the refugee families made food from their culture. We greeted each other and shared stories throughout the dinner. Then, my brothers and I played with the Syrian kids. Looking back, I realize that it showed me how much I have in common with all refugees – even as elements in society try to paint them as dangerous or “other.” Like how DuBois worked in the State Department to help refugees, we too brought relief to the Syrian refugees in a different, special way: By making them feel welcome in our country and our community. I continue to support the refugee community, participating in refugee Shabbats and supporting efforts to get them established in their new lives.

My older brother, Ravi, had a profound impact on my journey to becoming a community leader. For my whole life, my two brothers were my best friends. My family was tight-knit and loving, and I didn't want anything else. But when Ravi tragically passed away in 2021, my idea of family turned into something much larger. It started with the *shiva*. When hundreds of people came to our backyard and mourned with us, I realized my family was not just our blood relatives; it was the whole community. People I barely knew supplied us with food for months; they raised tens of thousands of dollars for memorials to my brother. The hardest moments in my life solidified an idea that was never clear to me, but always a part of me: I too must give back to my community and help people in need.

I have taken a leadership role in causes that keep my brother's memory alive. With my family, I am working to build Ravi's Bimah, an open-air stage in the middle of the JCC Camps at Medford. We also established and fund the Ravi Bloom Mensch award, a \$500 annual scholarship given to a young member of my synagogue who, like Ravi, are emerging leader and embody the qualities of kindness, enthusiasm, inclusivity, as well as have a love and passion for learning. Ravi was a *madrikh*, or teaching assistant, at our synagogue, and a beloved counselor at JCC Camps. He inspired children to be their best selves. Through these memorial projects, Ravi's impact extends beyond the people who knew and loved him, to the many others who will grow to know him. He inspires and impacts me every day. Maybe children in the future will learn about him and be inspired like I was by learning about Josiah DuBois. As I get ready to graduate high school, I'm excited to dive into studies that will prepare me to make my mark in this world. At the University of Delaware, I will be pursuing Environmental Studies. Like DuBois, I am determined to make a difference, despite the obstacles. Real change can only happen when you stick to your goal.