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“What Makes America Great”

By Gabrielle DeMarco

On a table in the corner of the well-kept nursing home in my small town, there lies a box full of puzzle pieces. All different shapes and sizes, scattered in disarray. Putting these pieces together seems an effort in futility. The huddled white heads, surrounding the table day after day, know differently. They recognize the tools and effort required to complete this project are the same qualities that make America great. Consistent, patient hard work, utilizing talents and collaborating for a common purpose are the ingredients which define American greatness.

Week after week, I watch as the puzzle takes form. This creation is not formed in a single sitting. Rather, it is a work of collaboration. It is made piece by piece, as various seniors pass the table and discover an area where they can contribute. I'm reminded of the feelings I get when I see the Golden Gate bridge, walk through the beautifully columned Capital buildings in Washington D.C. or gaze at the Grand Coulee dam, and think of the American workers whose sweat and labor created those masterpieces. Each of our great inventions, laws, architectural masterpieces and cultural and technological advances started with a dream. Only after years of hard work, failures and successes, did the dream start to take shape. America's greatness is found as each of us dream and then consistently, patiently do our part to reach our dreams.

Completing the puzzle requires each senior to utilize his or her own uniquely gifted talents to advance the progression of the masterpiece. America's onlookers may be convinced that our pieces simply do not fit together. From the outside, our ethnicities, genders, religions and sexualities seem to post a banner across our foreheads that we do not belong. However, those differences make us stronger. The seniors leave the edge pieces to the grey-haired man who always wears his suit jacket to dinner. He is an expert in spotting the straight lines amidst the jumbled pieces. A tiny pink-clad senior gets the red pieces. She is able to recognize beautiful, subtle differences in the shades no one else can see. Two friends laugh as they spend hours compiling pieces no one else wants to work on...their contribution is vital to the finished piece. The seniors in my local nursing home show how our unique talents and visions for the future can result in a beautiful outcome.

America is not great due to one individual's accomplishments. Like the puzzle, America greatness comes through the unification of its citizens. As we collaborate to solve a problem affecting us all, our gaze is turned from our differences to our shared goals. When one individual is perplexed and blinded, another is given eyes of understanding. Some are able to immediately see the vision, while others come to recognize it with help. If frustration sets in, another comes to assist and lift. Eventually, red, white, and blue creased cardboard pieces are brought into alignment. A trilogy of colors, painstakingly brought together piece by piece, have created a brilliant American Flag. Joy fills the faces of the older crowd as the last piece is placed. Collaborators hug and comment on the finished product...proud to be a part of the effort. They have lived long enough to realize the patience, efforts and unity needed to finish this puzzle mirror the qualities which make America great. United, with vision, they have accomplished the seemingly impossible.