

Patrick Caden Grider

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Jefferson County International Baccalaureate School, Irondale, AL

Educator: Teresa Bruce

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How a Poem Shaped my Perspective on Civic Engagement

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I read John Donne's poem, "For Whom the Bell Tolls," several years ago, and it has influenced the way I view the world. The poem speaks of how one person's demise affects everyone because "no man is an island." The lines "Every man is a piece of the continent / A part of the main," express that every individual is part of the whole. "Any man's death diminishes me / Because I am involved in mankind," reflects the author's idea that we are all connected and the loss of even one person creates a hole in the fabric of society. We all lose when a part of humanity with unique experiences, skills, thoughts, and ways of viewing the world can no longer share those things.

When I realized the meaning of the poem, I wanted to find out what inspired it, so I researched Donne's life. He lived from 1572 to 1631 and wrote this poem as prose during a time when he was recovering from a nearly fatal illness and after he had experienced a period of financial difficulty and his wife had died. Scholars think the lines, "Therefore, send not to know / For whom the bell tolls / It tolls for thee," arose from Donne's musings when he was sick in bed and would hear church bells toll.

This poem influenced me by expressing concepts and emotions I would not have been able to articulate with such clarity. It made me conscious of myself as a part of mankind rather than only as an individual. When someone dies or is oppressed or is denied opportunities, it hurts us all. "For Whom the Bell Tolls" shaped my outlook on being engaged with and responsible for my community. The message became even more plain to me when I moved to Birmingham, Alabama, just before my ninth-grade year. It was a driving force behind my co-founding the nonprofit Birmingham Youth Action Committee.

After becoming a Birmingham resident, I learned more about the city, its role in the civil rights movement, and its history since then. It took a couple of decades before Birmingham authentically owned its history, but now it does — or at least tries to. The Civil Rights District draws visitors from around the world. This is where police turned fire hoses and dogs on children marchers and four girls were killed by a bomb in their church. The nation changed because of what happened here, but in real people's lives, there was personal pain; and for white Birminghamians, there was much-deserved shame. The city processed a lot in order to embrace its history. However, we are still too fractured — many schools remain segregated, and our metro area is divided into dozens of municipalities that fail to cooperate. A fatal police shooting at a suburban mall last year brought much of our unhealed issues to the surface, and a viral video of hate speech by high schoolers demonstrated that racism endures. But even with these challenges — perhaps even because of them — I am inspired knowing that anything we do to bring our city together has a ripple effect because the world still has its eyes on Birmingham.

The Birmingham Youth Action Committee is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit I founded with my best friend James Goodman in 2017. The BYAC's goal is to better our community while bringing together young people from different backgrounds to foster unity. Our accomplishments have included: raising almost \$6,000 for school supplies we distributed to underfunded, inner-city elementary schools; picking up more than 150 bags of litter from school campuses and roadsides in our city; going door-to-door to encourage residents to vote in the 2017 special U.S. Senate election between Roy Moore and Doug Jones and producing/distributing handouts showing candidates' stances on major issues; and creating a letter-writing campaign to try to recruit Amazon's second headquarters to Birmingham.

John Donne's poem opened my eyes to the issues that plague my city, and it gave me a desire to find remedies. "No man is an island." No woman is an island. No child is an island. *I am not an island.* This idea of interconnectivity, of doing my part for the whole, has become part of me and my perspective.