

Building Community During the Pandemic

SEL FOCUS: SELF-AWARENESS

Story: "Acting Brave Made Me Brave" by Shameera Sheeraz

Story Summary: Shameera surprises herself when she's able to remain strong and brave during two natural disasters. Inspired by her courage in handling these situations, she attempts to conquer her biggest fear: public speaking.

1. GETTING STARTED (10 mins)

This beginning check-in will focus group members and give an opportunity to see how they are doing emotionally.

1. Welcome everyone and remind them to keep themselves on mute until it is their turn to talk.
2. Review any Group Agreements, if applicable.
3. Rose, Bud, Thorn: Have each student name their rose (thing that is going well for them this week), their bud (thing that they are looking forward to), and their thorn (thing that's bothering them or didn't go great this week).

2. OPENING QUESTIONS (10 mins)

These pre-reading reflection questions will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

They can be answered in a whole group discussion, in a freewrite, or in small groups using breakout rooms.

Ask the group:

- What are you most looking forward to this school year?
- What do you think people can

learn from experiencing something difficult?

- What is something you learned about yourself during the pandemic?

3. READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY (20 mins)

Practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing the story as a group will help members build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young person who draws strength and confidence through difficult experiences.
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Group members take turns reading aloud, using the "raise your hand" feature of your videoconferencing platform, or some other pre-determined method. They should be given the option of not reading. Ask students to identify when they have a connection to something in the story. When this occurs, they should make a note on a piece of paper or type up where the connection

occurred on a word processing document.

3. **Read and discuss the story on page 3 together:** When you finish the story, ask the group to discuss their reactions to the story, including the connections they made.

4. EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY (10 mins)

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors. Select the option below that works best for your group.

Option #1—Questions for Further Discussion and Writing: Use the following questions to continue the discussion or as a writing assignment group members complete on their own.

- **Looking back at yourself to when the pandemic just started: how have you grown since then?**
- **What strengths or increased maturity are you seeing in yourself as a result of the pandemic?**
- **What do you need from the adults in your life during a difficult time in order to come out of it a better person? How can you get that?**

Option #2—Draw It: Have group members draw two self-portraits—one at the start of the pandemic and one now. Through drawing and labeling, have participants point out important characteristics and strengths they have developed during the pandemic. They should label their drawing with a quote from Shameera’s story that reflects the

positive change they’ve experienced.

These drawings can be shared with the whole group, in breakout rooms, or on discussion boards.

5. CLOSING CIRCLE (5 mins)

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

- **What stood out for you in Shameera’s story and our activities today?**
- **Finish this sentence: “My strength comes from...”**

WRITING EXTENSION

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives students the opportunity to share their point of view and provides additional literacy practice.

Write a story about a time when you had to gather courage to overcome a fear. The fear could be “big”—like an earthquake or pandemic—or “small”—like public speaking. Set up your story by describing yourself before you overcame the fear. Follow that with the events that led up to your success. End with how you felt afterward.

If you haven’t overcome the fear yet, describe how you would like to overcome it.

Include descriptive details, dialogue, and scenes in your story. In your first draft, don’t be too concerned about proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Acting Brave Made Me Brave

By Shameera Sheeraz

When I was 7 years old, an earthquake hit my village of Gujarat, Pakistan. I was sitting in my classroom, looking out the window feeling hot, tired, and bored. Then I felt the ground shake. Seconds later, the whole school shook. The teachers immediately began rushing the students out. The screaming and the grownups' panic got to me and I thought it was the last day of my life.

“Get out! Out of the door, now!” my teacher yelled. All I wanted to do was go to my mom because I was so scared. I was shaking and wanted to cry, but I didn't—even though everyone was frantic and frightened around me. My grandfather, who was the school principal, looked so confident and brave that it made me want to be like him. And by hoping to be like him, I was able to feel brave.

Once we were all outside, we heard a loud boom. Different parts of the school ceiling had collapsed. The students looked frozen as they watched. I thought, “That ceiling could have fallen on us.” We talked among ourselves, mostly saying, “Thank god we left the building in time.”

The earthquake destroyed the parts of the village closest to the main roads, and some houses collapsed and fell on each other. Our house was in the middle of the village where there was no damage. A few people who were near the collapsed buildings had minor injuries but, fortunately, no one died.

I was surprised that I didn't cry during the earthquake. It made me think maybe I was stronger than people thought I was.

I hadn't envisioned myself as a brave person before. I am the

youngest in my family and everyone doted on me and treated me like a baby. I was encouraged to be hardworking and responsible, but not strong or courageous.

I had fears, too. I think my biggest fear was giving a presentation in front of a large audience. But after the earthquake, I decided maybe I had the courage to overcome this fear. I didn't want to be a fearful person.

Little did I know that after this earthquake, another natural disaster was waiting for me. This time my family and I were in Brooklyn because we had moved here in 2007. A few days before Hurricane Sandy, every news channel was warning people to get supplies like food and water in case of power loss.

That night was full of wind, lightning, and rain. The streets were deserted. My family and I were sitting in the living room watching the news and looking out the window when we saw water pouring through the streets. We guessed that the Rockaway Inlet, which connects to the Atlantic Ocean and is only five blocks from our building, had overflowed.

During this second disaster, I felt the same courage and resolve that I had during the earthquake. I wasn't too scared and I didn't feel like crying. Instead, I discovered a part of myself that I didn't know existed.

Fortunately, everyone else in my family was also succeeding at staying calm. My brother kept going in and out of the rooms. My older sister was trying to be brave, but by the way she was sitting on the sofa grabbing its sides, I could tell she was scared. My mother is claustrophobic, so when the water was surrounding the building I could see her sweating and looking out the window

again and again. My father sat down quietly next to her and whispered, “Look, our children are so strong.” That made me feel powerful.

I looked out the window, watching the water that had already entered our building and had covered the first floor. We were on the second floor. “It’s just water” is what I kept thinking. “All of this has to end eventually, so why worry about it?”

I sat next to my mom and said, “Panicking isn’t of any use to us. This is out of our control. It’ll go away soon.” My mom looked at me, surprised. “Don’t let this courage of yours go to waste. Always try to hold on to it,” she said.

My mom usually talked to me like I was a child but now she was treating me like I was a grown up. I felt proud. While I checked to make sure the flashlights were working, my brother said, “Looks like someone’s having fun. You seem like you want to go outside.” I knew this was how it felt to face your fears.

The thunder rumbled on and on. We had no electricity; the fresh smell of scented candles had filled our apartment combined with the smell of grass and rain. I could hear people in the hallway crying. My mom, dad, and sister were huddled together on the large sofa while my brother was leaning on it. I continued sitting by myself on the other sofa looking out the window. I prayed for the weather to improve.

The storm gradually faded away overnight, but I don’t think anyone in our house slept much that night.

School was out for a week and everything outside was a mess. Many trees had fallen, windows were broken, people’s belongings had floated away in the water, and cars had stopped working. My father is a taxi driver and he had tried to park his car in a safe

place, but the hurricane had damaged it too. It was in the repair shop for a few weeks and we had to figure out how to get by the rest of the month without much money.

After the storm, I felt different; I felt like the bravest person. I realized I felt the same strength and calm during the hurricane that I had during the earthquake in Gujarat. It made me wonder how I could be so scared of public speaking.

If I didn't lose my courage to a hurricane and an earthquake (which isn't even in human control), then I shouldn't lose my courage to something within my control—like talking in front of a group. I just needed to believe in myself and my ability to come up with ways not to let the fear control me.

In the past, when I've had to speak in front of the class, my legs start shaking the moment my name is called to present. What goes through my mind is: "Why is everyone looking at me? Look at that girl looking so deeply at me. She's probably judging me. What would happen if I decide to just walk out of class and never come back?"

But this winter when I had to give a presentation in my chemistry class, I came up with three new strategies to overcome my fear: I would take deep breaths and imagine that only my friends were watching me, not the whole class including the teacher. I'd remind myself that I've handled more stressful situations than this. And I'd remember that the more I spoke, the closer I'd get to the end of the presentation. Like being in Hurricane Sandy, I knew the more I thought about the presentation's end the easier it would be for me to handle.

So I felt ready. The teacher asked who wanted to volunteer and I mustered the courage to raise my hand. I felt more relaxed than I

thought I would even though all eyes were on me. When I started reading from the small book that I had created, I gained more confidence. The more I talked, the more relaxed I became because I knew I kept getting closer to being finished. In two minutes I was done with my presentation and everybody was clapping. Inside my brain, I clapped for myself, because I had finally done it.

Shameera enrolled in Brooklyn College where she was also accepted into CUNY's Macaulay Honors College.