

Where The Light Breaks Even

My name is Ume, and I am so lucky to live in Greenwood Haven with my best friends Ray and Fatima. Our town is the type of place where the streets echo with soft, gentle sounds of children laughing and playing. The sun shines brightly in our quiet community. In our town, I have come to the realization that every voice matters.

It all began one mild morning, as I walked up the winding stairs to the rooftop garden we had all nurtured together at our community centre. The kale and arugula danced as the breeze swayed them back and forth. I bent down to start harvesting, my new shoes getting all dirty from the soil, but I'm not one to care about that. Fatima joined me, her hair catching the sun at the perfect angle, yet the solar flower still cast shadows on us.

I lift my gaze to admire all of our hard work. Clusters of colourful flowers bloom in every direction. Their striking colours blind me.

“Do you think we can get the town to vote in favour of our new composting initiative?” questioned Fatima. Her eyes were beaming with hope.

“Absolutely,” I announced, feeling the warmth from the sun on my back.

Fatima always believed in blending the old with the new, and I always admired her for it. She had an adventurous spirit that drew her to try new things, and she often encouraged me to step outside my comfort zone. Just then, we heard a cheerful shriek and saw Ray waving at us with excitement.

“Hey, you two! I just got off the phone with the Renewable Energy Council! They are looking for three volunteers to install solar panels around the community centre!” he shouted.

I exchange a happy glance with Fatima. “Let's do it!” I shouted. Believe it or not, it was just two short years ago that I was dreaming about creating change in our community. I can't believe we get to work on this community project together.

The three of us have been inseparable since the third grade. We have always shared the same ideas about making our community more sustainable, accessible, and inclusive. But today, as we sat at the big oak picnic table beneath the massive maple trees discussing our plans, a tension cracked in the air.

“What do you guys think about installing the solar panels next to the rooftop garden?” I say. Fatima nods her head furiously. “That's a great idea Ume, how do you suppose we should configure them?”

Ray rolls his eyes. “No, no the solar panels definitely shouldn't go on the roof, we don't want to ruin our pretty garden with boring pieces of metal.” I pause, caught off guard. “Oh...okay...” I stammer, “where would you suggest we put them instead?”

“They have to be installed along the footpath to the playground. Anywhere else is just plain wrong. I know what's best.”

As we ate our sandwiches and continued brainstorming, Ray's ideas continued to overshadow mine and Fatima's. I became tense as he laid out his vision enthusiastically, his voice dominating the conversation.

It was as if he had forgotten we were a part of this journey too, as if he wasn't listening to our opinions altogether. Or maybe he just did not care.

“Ray”, I said, frustrated, “We should also take into consideration what the community wants. Maybe we could send out a survey asking people what they would like to see?”

Ray seemed taken aback. “I just wanted to make an impact.” he snapped, storming away.

The air felt thick with words and emotions unspoken.

Later that night, I could not fall asleep. I tossed and turned under my quilt that Fatima made for my birthday, which she carefully crafted out of colourful recycled fabrics. Ray’s smile beamed at me from the framed photograph of the two of us on my bedside table. I could not shake off what happened to the three of us today. The thought swirling in my mind taking full control over me. Why was it so hard to ensure that everyone's voice is heard equally? Why is it so hard for us to communicate?

I could not stand it any longer, so the next day I called a meeting with Fatima and Ray. We gathered under the heavy branches of our favourite tree in the community park, sunlight filtering through the grand leaves.

“I think we need to rethink how we share ideas,” I began to say, choosing my words very carefully. “ We are in this together, and have always been in this together. Every voice deserves to be heard and have its own moment to shine.”

To my relief, Fatima began to nod in agreement. “It’s not just about improving our community. It's about including and listening to everyone: male, female, non-binary, old and young. We should encourage one another to help create a bigger and better future for everyone.”

I looked over at Ray, who was taking a deep breath. It looked as though his expression was beginning to shift. “I'm sorry, I didn't realize that I was making you guys feel excluded. I value our community just as much as my friendship with you two.”

In the next couple of weeks, we continued our work together, but this time finally felt different. Together, we created a series of workshops for the people of

Greenwood Haven. We went door-to-door to survey our senior neighbours for their opinions. We visited school classrooms to get the kids excited about our project and to help us brainstorm. People, regardless of who they are, could share their ideas and hopes with the community.

We emphasized that every contribution, every voice matters. Soon enough, we saw the impact of diverse perspectives coming to life in our projects.

Our rooftop garden continued to thrive, as did our friendship. We learned to listen to each other and ensure that no voice went unheard. As we installed the solar panels around the community centre, I felt a deep sense of pride. The energy shared among us three was brighter than any solar panel could produce.

In the end, our small town became a place where light breaks even. Where each voice, regardless of gender, age or beliefs, is heard equally.

Together, we not only built and developed a more sustainable community, but also created a movement. This is an important promise to keep reaching for the better and being inclusive while doing it.

And in that light, we finally understood that the future was truly brighter when we all worked together.