Commentary First Place Winner

By Josh Shi, Lakota East High School

It's not difficult to overlook Mary Beth Tinker. A thin, middle-aged woman with a bob cut, she doesn't command with a booming voice like Martin Luther King Jr., or demand attention with moving rhetoric like Malcolm X.

But her message is equally important: her landmark case, Tinker v. Des Moines in 1969, was a groundbreaking step forward for student rights, both within the classroom and outside when the Supreme Court ruled 7-2 that students do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." She and her schoolmates, who were suspended for wearing black armbands in protest of the Vietnam War, showed their peers across America that they had the same rights as adults and that they should not and could not be silenced by a few disapproving adults.

Tinker v. Des Moines was more than a case about students' rights. It was a call to action for young people in the United States, telling students that they have both the right and the obligation to stand up for their beliefs, and that what they believe is just as valid as the beliefs of any adult.

But now that call to action is fading away. Genuine movements from youth have given way to "slacktivism," the phenomenon so named for the tendency of teenagers and young people to pick up on a viral activism trend with what seems like violent fervor only to forget about it within a few weeks.

And indeed slacktivism has never been so clear than in this era, the age of online petitions and text-to-donate numbers. A period when people promote clicking Facebook likes

and retweets as an alternative to action and fundraising. A time when a video about Joseph Kony, a violent Ugandan warlord, can break the record for being the fastest YouTube video to reach 100 million views in early 2012 but almost go unnoticed later on April 20, 2012, its day of action, when groups from major cities across the US reported fewer than 50 people gathering in support.

The irony of slacktivism is that, even though it relies on the massive interconnectivity that comes with the digital age, it discourages physical human interaction by leading young people to believe that their like or retweet is all it takes to change the world. Groups that promote slacktivism tell teenagers that there is no need to go outside and stand up for what they believe in if they can do it at home, for the cost of $25 on their parent's credit card.

But their $25 isn't enough. No one's $25 is enough, just how no one's online petition signature is going to convince congressmen and lawmakers that their cause is worth listening to, is worth fighting for.

Since Tinker V. Des Moines, Supreme Court student civil rights cases have tended to limit student voice: Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier in 1988 ruled that student publications were subject to prior review if they were funded by the school, Bethel School District v. Fraser ruled in favor of the school in holding the suspension of a student who used double entendres in a speech and Morse v. Frederick in 2007 allowed educators to suppress student speech at school functions.

Without the death of slacktivism, these cases will not be the last of their kind. Legitimate change does not come from computer clicks. It comes from determination, from being willing to do the difficult thing in a difficult setting.

And if students have no motivation to fight for themselves, they will soon find themselves with nothing left to fight for.