

Brian Brooks

ORANGE, CALIFORNIA

3RD PLACE

Brian Brooks, 18, graduated in June from RAI Online Charter School in Fallbrook, California. He enjoys reading, writing, drawing and physical fitness activities. He will be attending BIOLA University in the fall through the Torrey Honors Institute and hopes to eventually become an attorney.

WHAT THE AMERICAN DREAMS MEANS TO ME

One hot May afternoon in 1954, a young attorney walked down the steps of the Supreme Court building with a beaming smile on his face. It had been a long time coming and a tremendous amount of work, but he and his team had finally swayed all nine judges that “separate educational facilities [were] inherently unequal,” overturning the judicial dinosaur that was Plessy vs Ferguson. The attorney’s name was Thurgood Marshall, and he deeply believed in the American Dream. His mother, Norma, was a teacher, and gave the young boy an appreciation for the Constitution that he carried for the rest of his life. In college, he attended Howard University Law School, where he was taught by the NAACP firebrand, Charles Hamilton Houston, who encouraged him to challenge the laws which would eventually be toppled in Marshall’s most famous case. The Brown victory, however, was not Marshall’s only achievement. On June 13, 1967, President Johnson nominated Thurgood Marshall for Supreme Court Justice and in 1993, Marshall posthumously received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Bill Clinton.

I don’t believe that America is the only place such a triumph of human achievement could take place, but I do believe that America has equipped her citizens with many tools to encourage the success of every American. One of these tools is the Constitution, which not only describes an ideal government where anyone can achieve their American Dreams, but also serves to contrast a less-than-ideal government which had turned the dream into a nightmare. Although Britain developed the system of Common Law that we still depend on today, King George did not seem to think that traditional English liberties applied to the colonies. In this spirit, the Constitution not only established the infrastructure of our nation which has allowed so many to prosper, it also specifically states in its famous prologue that one of its main goals would be to establish justice. In Section 2, Clause 3, the Constitution protects the rights of the accused by describing the idea of trial by jury, a concept central to our judicial system’s goal of habeas corpus. America was not the first nation to state this goal however. The thirty-ninth clause of the Magna Carta stated that “no freemen shall be taken...except by the lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land.” The Constitution, however, makes no distinction between slave and free, common or noble and even commands that “no titles of nobility shall be granted by the United States.” Though in many ways, it took about two centuries, this ideal of equal protection is now more of a reality than ever.

Despite these strides, many people still felt the Constitution did not adequately protect individual rights. Notable Framers such as George Mason, Patrick Henry, and Richard Henry Lee refused to sign any constitution which did not include a Bill of Rights. In response, Congress' first major duty was to pass ten amendments which set limits that the federal, and eventually state, governments couldn't cross, thus safe-guarding individual liberties. In the Bill, the rights of accused criminals are featured as one of the most prominent elements. The writ of habeas corpus was to be observed at all times and all Americans were to be tried before a jury for their crimes. These ideas, explained in the Bill of Rights and other documents, effectively put the American Dream in writing.

As a first general American, I am inspired by the bravery of the men who wrote these unprecedented documents that set new standards and defended new principles. My dream is to become a lawyer, but if I had lived in a world without the Framers, I would most likely never think about the legal profession. Before the American Dream, people had their positions handed to them; men from noble families followed their fathers into professional positions, and others labored for a meager living. Without the American Dream, my father would not have thought to pursue the career he loved, but rather followed in his father's footsteps, taking up carpentry, like his father and grandfather had done going back five generations. Without the American Dream, Thurgood Marshall and his allies would not have thought to "cash the check," that Martin Luther King described. Without the American Dream, Lyndon Johnson would never have appointed Marshall to be a Supreme Court Justice. And without the Constitution and its sister documents, there would be no American Dream.