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Essential Parts

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Sean Gray
2nd Place

Essential Parts

Two weeks ago, I finished another year as a camp counselor, a great job that often asks me to create activities on the spot. On the last day, I began to put things back in our supply room, and I found a big box of supplies—paint, props, extra wood, all things that I could have used during the summer. Sadly, they were tossed in the back of a dark basement room—a box of potential, unused and wasted. Those were just objects, but the same disregard is far too often shown to people.

In Joshua Davis' provocative *Spare Parts*, we meet four undocumented immigrants: Oscar Vasquez, an ROTC leader; Cristian Arcega, a young genius; Lorenzo Santillan, a troubled innovator; and Luis Aranda, a gentle giant. With Fredi Lajvardi, a science teacher at Carl Hayden High School in Phoenix, Arizona, this motley group set out to build a functioning underwater robot for a national competition. With no previous experience, they entered the contest hoping not to come in last place. They got that wish. In fact, they won first place, beating out entries from colleges and universities nationwide, most notably MIT. It was an amazing achievement, even inspiring, but why should any of us care?

Without a positive learning experience and the guidance of a caring teacher, these young men would have easily fallen through the cracks, left in a state not much better than the leftover supplies that I found by accident. Davis, however, shows us four guys who, for a brief time, tasted success.

In addition to his honors-level classes, Cristian Arcega took online classes in cell biology and Shakespeare. A clear genius, he was the mastermind behind the victory. One would hope that after high school, Cristian would get into a great college or university and go on to have a

fulfilling, even lucrative, career. However, *Spare Parts* does not have such a storybook ending. Because of Propositions 200 and 300, which respectively ban public services and raise tuition exponentially for undocumented people, Cristian was unable to finish his mechanical-engineering degree at Arizona State. Instead, he took community college classes while working at Home Depot. A clearly capable and gifted student, Cristian was denied an education simply because he was not an American citizen.

Cristian was not the only victim of circumstance in the foursome—Lorenzo ended up as a line-item cook, and Luis worked nights as a janitor (222). After serving as a sergeant in Afghanistan, Oscar worked as a foreman, a steady, well-paying job—though he had to wait almost a decade to serve his country due to his immigration status. In our “land of opportunity,” these young men were denied opportunities that many of us take for granted, just because they were not born here.

In naming his work *Spare Parts*, Davis makes a strong statement. The title is a clear nod to the pieces that built “Stinky,” the boys’ robot. The reference, however, can be taken much further. Spare parts can be seen in two ways: as superfluous pieces, unnecessary to the whole, or as essential pieces, wisely kept as insurance for future need. According to many people, these four young men were unnecessary and unwanted because of their immigration status. Since they were not citizens, many presumed they had nothing to contribute and simply took up space, like the spare parts I found in the basement; yet these underfunded, underestimated kids prevailed over the “best” minds in the country. They show that talent can show up in any place, no matter the circumstances. As a nation, we have an obligation to find it.

It is often said that young people are the world’s most valuable resource. Our government today, however, is failing to recognize this. According to the U.S. Office of Management and

Budget, the current administration plans to cut nine billion dollars from the Department of Education's funding, while increasing the Department of Homeland Security's funding by almost three billion dollars (48). Instead of nonessential security measures, the government should promote funding for education—especially for schools like Carl Hayden, where “spare parts” can be found everywhere.

As Providence College students, we have been given a special opportunity. Many people our age dream of having a college experience like ours. We have a voice, and we should make it heard. We should vote, volunteer, write, and speak about issues that matter. We must do this, because there are so many people who cannot. In some eyes, those people are spare parts. But we must know better, and we must treat them as valuable, essential parts to our society—insurance for the future of our world.

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