



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

**“Heroes and Role Models:
Emma Lazarus and Arthur Ashe”
by Alanna Olken
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Two individuals who demonstrated values that are important to me throughout their lives were the poet Emma Lazarus and tennis legend Arthur Ashe. Specifically, Emma Lazarus demonstrated the value of community and Arthur Ashe demonstrated the value of courage.

Emma Lazarus was born in 1849 in New York City into a prominent fourth generation Jewish-American family. She was well-educated, and fluent in both Russian and Hebrew.

Although wealthy, Emma grew up near the tenement houses of the Lower Eastside where waves of poor Jewish immigrants settled. As a young girl, Emma witnessed the terrible living conditions that the immigrants faced. Emma saw starvation, lack of medical attention, lack of clothing, unsafe, inadequate housing, and barbaric working conditions.

This early and constant exposure undoubtedly formed her views and shaped her values on the inequality of the human condition.

At the young age of 22, in 1871, she was already an adept author, translator and poet with published works in art, literature, and music. This was a remarkable and rare feat for a young woman at that time.

In 1883, Emma traveled extensively throughout Europe and gained further exposure to the deplorable conditions of the European Jews. Returning from her trip, she became one of the most outspoken American women on Jewish issues, using her fame to bring awareness to the idea of Zionism, resettlement of Jews in Palestine. This occurred long before the meeting of the first World Zionist Congress in Switzerland in 1897.

That same year, she founded an organization called the Society for the Improvement and Colonization of Eastern European Jews. In addition, she created classes for Jewish immigrants to find housing. Instead of Emma ignoring society's problems and living in the “lap of luxury”, she chose to help her fellow Jews in their plight.

This is extremely significant to me because I believe that what she did was selfless by devoting her life to helping the less fortunate in her community.

As time went on, Emma wrote less about art, music and literature and more about the Jewish immigrants' struggle, and anti-semitism. These poems and articles gave hope to Jewish and Gentile immigrants and influenced many more people to help the immigrant population. Her most famous poem, *The New Colossus*, was written in 1883 to raise funds for the Pedestal for the Statue of Liberty.

In 1887, after returning from a second trip to Europe, Emma Lazarus became ill and died. In 1903, a commemorative bronze tablet with her poem was placed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. It reads:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame, with conquering limbs astride from land to land; here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand a mighty woman with a torch, whose flame is the imprisoned lightning, and her name Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command the air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame. "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she with silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

Emma Lazarus' accomplishments are countless. She was an author, poet, translator, a champion for Zionist rights, and an advocate and activist for immigration rights. She dedicated her life for the betterment of the world, *tikkun olam*, and serves as my role model for demonstrating the values of community, selflessness, bravery and doing deeds of kindness, *gimeeloot hasadeem*.

Arthur Ashe was born in 1943 in the segregated south in Richmond, Virginia. He is someone who unmistakably demonstrated my value of courage throughout his entire life. Arthur had a pleasant home life, excelled at school, loved to read and listen to music with his mother.

But when Arthur turned six, she suddenly died. "Though heartbroken, Arthur's memory of his beloved mother was a source of inspiration throughout his life."

Although raised in a religious family, Arthur didn't wait for some sort of miracle or the help of God to help him through his childhood; he knew he'd had to work hard to achieve success. This follows a very important belief amongst humanistic Jews that people should be pro-active and put dreams and thoughts into action.

At the age of seven, Arthur took up tennis at the public recreation courts and instantly stood out as an agile and extremely skilled player. But since racial segregation was the law during his childhood and early youth, Ashe could not play in the usual junior tournaments. A black physician, Dr. Walter Johnson, saw the talent in young Arthur and became his mentor. Ashe moved to St. Louis during his high school years where he could compete and in 1961 he won the previously segregated U.S. interscholastic tournament.

At 17, he earned a tennis scholarship to UCLA, and was the first black to enroll in the university. This dual accomplishment was outstanding and demonstrated his bravery and pioneering spirit.

Shortly after Arthur Ashe arrived at the school, his tennis team was invited to compete at a distinguished all-white racquet club, however, Ashe was the only player not invited, presumably because of his race. Ashe stated that, "he didn't want to fight the racial battle at the time and temporally tolerated it."

But this first serious encounter with racism and segregation greatly affected him. I can definitely understand his choice in this situation because he was in his freshman year and he felt he should "lay low" and not draw a lot of attention because he was already a controversial figure as the only black on the team and in the school.

In 1963 he was selected to represent the United States in the Davis Cup as the first African American selected to play for the American team. And in 1965, he silenced his critics by becoming the best college tennis player in the nation. That same year, Martin Luther King, Jr. led the civil rights movement. This time, Ashe used his fame to raise public awareness about racial issues.

By publicly protesting for civil rights, Ashe demonstrated bravery because he was willing to sacrifice his safety by participating in peaceful marches that were often in the target of violence.

Ashe graduated UCLA in 1966 and joined the pro tennis circuit. In 1968 he won the U.S. Open and his team also won the Davis Cup. In 1969, as the #1 ranked American, he applied for a visa to play in the South African Open but was denied because of the color of his skin. This time, already internationally famous, he was determined to take a bold stand against apartheid and immediately received support from many prominent organizations and raised worldwide awareness of racial injustice.

In 1975, at the age of 31, Ashe enjoyed one of his finest seasons ever and won Wimbledon. He also attained the ultimate ranking of #1 player in the world.

At just 36 years old, Ashe suffered a heart attack and underwent quadruple bypass surgery. He was forced to retire in 1980. However, he wasn't discouraged. Always pro-active, he moved on to new prospects, serving as a chairperson of the American Heart Association. He also co-authored three autobiographies, which discussed turning adversity into positive opportunities.

He had another bypass surgery in 1983 and soon after his recovery, astonishingly resumed work. Five years later he was diagnosed with AIDS, most likely contracted from an infected blood transfusion during one of his two heart surgeries. He came to realize that AIDS wasn't the biggest burden he had faced and stated that "being black and unaccepted in society was much more painful emotionally." His racial battle, however, had already been peacefully fought for most of his life, and he came out of that fight victorious.

In 1992, Ashe announced to the world that he had AIDS. Already in the ravages of the disease, he nonetheless maintained a hopeful and positive attitude. He claimed that he wasn't "scared or nervous", but viewed his disease as just another opponent on the tennis court of life.

He founded an organization named the Arthur Ashe Fund for the Defeat of AIDS, which raised awareness.

Arthur Ashe died in 1993 at forty-nine years old. In his life he is remembered as a civil rights activist, a racial barrier breaker, an champion tennis player with three Grand Slam titles and 800 career victories, a husband and father, an author, an advocate, and an exceptionally courageous person.

I chose Arthur Ashe as my hero because I was searching for someone who was not only courageous, but displayed it in a very unique way. Arthur Ashe stood out as an individual who peacefully fought his battles and struggled through many obstacles with dignity: His mother died when he was young, he coped with the challenges of segregation, he was confronted with numerous health conditions, and was stricken with AIDS at a time when paranoia ran high and little was understood about the disease.

Throughout all the trials and tribulations of his life, he maintained an optimistic, pro-active attitude, and faced every challenge with a brave heart, gentle courage, grace and valor.