



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

**“Heroes and Role Models:
Pete Seeger”**

**by Ryan Kramer
December 5, 2009**

When I was in the process of thinking about who my heroes and role models were, I first had to think of what a Hero and Role model is. I thought this would be easy, but to my surprise I was hard pressed to figure out what my thoughts were about them. My mind jumped around between different ideas. It was especially hard when my brain wasn't focused, which was a lot of the time. However, I finally came to my conclusion.

In my opinion, a hero is someone who you look up to as a 'god like' figure. A hero is someone who you wish you could be like, but you know that it will be very difficult to get there. I could say that Derek Jeter is my baseball hero, because I wish I could play baseball like him. I know I never will, but I can dream. Also, I think you select someone as your hero because the person does something, or is part of something that matches your own personality.

A role model, on the other hand, is a person who you look up to, and try to model your behavior and way of life after. A role model could be someone famous, but it could also be someone you know well. Your parents could be a role model, or your teacher, or one of your friends. Heck, your sibling could be a role model, though it seldom is. I don't really have a hero. Or rather I do, but all my heroes come from movies and comic books, and watching too much TV. However, a role model was not as easy to choose as it would seem. Eventually, I found the person I wanted: Pete Seeger.

I chose Pete Seeger for a number of reasons. First of all, many of his values match my values. I think the three values that match mine are courage, repairing the world, and guarding the earth. The second reason I chose him is because he stood up for his beliefs, even when he faced jail and discrimination.

Pete Seeger was born in 1919 and practically came into this world playing music. His first instrument, from an early age, was the ukulele, and by the time he was a senior in high school, he had taught himself how to play the tenor banjo. Though he planned to become a journalist, it was certain that his future would lie in music. After learning to play the tenor banjo, he took lessons for the 5-string banjo. He also picked up tricks on the 12-string banjo from Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly. However, the 5-string banjo with an extra long neck became his trademark.

Seeger started off college at Harvard, where he was in the same class as John F. Kennedy, but left pretty quickly. He then went with his parents on a trip down South. He did this to hear the different types of his preferred music, folk. Apparently he got what he wanted. I believe it altered his perspective dramatically. In fact, I believe it was this experience that made him so determined to fight for other's civil rights when the time came.

In 1941, Seeger found some good friends. Woody Guthrie, Lee Hays, Milard Lampel, and Pete Hawas joined with him, and they formed the Almanac Singers. The Almanacs sang for many organizations, including many labor unions. Labor unions were organized groups of workers who tried to get better wages and working conditions. One of my great great grandfathers on dad's side was a labor organizer.

The Almanacs also opposed war, and many of their songs were based on this belief. However, when the United States entered World War II they began to become pro war. According to a source I looked at, "Popular outrage at Japan and their own hatred of Hitler led the Almanacs to write war songs in earnest." Their first big rally took place at Madison Square Garden in late May 1941. The union songs they sang there brought the loudest applause and the concert influenced the birth of many unions.

They sang for a few years together, but then Seeger received his draft notice. Oddly enough, he wrote in his journal that he was "almost glad" to get out of the Almanacs. They had been falling apart, and he wanted to get out before it collapsed completely. He served in World War II, and then went back to New York in 1945. However, now he had a purpose. He resolved to start a singing labor movement with Lee Hays, Woody Guthrie, Alan Lomax and others. Eventually, he succeeded. In the time after the war, Seeger performed with his friends at many union events, but then the unions started to reject them, and they stopped performing. They also started a news bulletin called the *People's Songs*, but it dissolved in 1949.

Over the years, Seeger performed frequently, both as a soloist and with Ronnie Gilbert, Lee Hays and Fred Hellerman as The Weavers. The *People's Songs* bulletin became *Sing Out*, the magazine of folk song. During the years that *Sing Out* flourished, Seeger used a column titled "Johnny Appleseed, Jr." to encourage a generation of young folk musicians and songwriters.

Then tragedy struck. There was tremendous fear of Communism, partly because of the Korean War, and partly because Russia had created the nuclear bomb in addition to the US having it. Congress set up the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which led to the McCarthy witch-hunts. The HUAC looked into anyone who was a liberal, involved in unions, or worked in the civil rights movement and accused them of being a communist. In order to prove you were loyal to the US, you had to take a loyalty oath, and name names of other people who were or had been Communists. Over 2000 people lost their jobs and 400 went to jail, not having a fair trial. Pete Seeger was among them and was singled out for being a communist.

Seeger had been part of the Communist party in the past but he no longer was. Nevertheless, Seeger refused to take the loyalty oath, which led to official blacklisting. Also, when the HUAC asked whether or not he had been a Communist, Seeger stood up in the middle of Congress, and said that he had the right to do what he wanted, and it wasn't their business. He didn't even try to use protection under the 5th amendment.

This makes me look up to him even more, because I don't know if I would have been able to do that. Unfortunately, it also angered his enemies, and made it almost impossible to perform in public. However, Seeger got around this by performing at colleges, summer camps, in non-traditional concert halls, in concerts produce by his manager Harold Leventhal, and at benefits for many causes. The folk movement explosion of the early '60s increased his popularity quite a bit.

On June 8, 1963, Seeger performed at Carnegie Hall on behalf of the civil rights movement. The concert was actually a farewell party for the Seeger family as they prepared to journey around the world. Seeger strummed up a song on his banjo and the crowd started singing with him. By the time he got to

We Shall Overcome, the crowd was already thinking about civil rights. By the end of that night, the civil rights movement was on everyone's mind. To be able to say all the things he said, and to do all the things he did that night would require vast amounts of courage. Because courage is one of my core values, I can connect with him.

I find it ironic that back then, African Americans couldn't even drink at the same water fountain, and now, an African American has just been elected as president. During President Obama's inauguration concert, Pete Seeger even got to play, just like he did when he was fighting for African American's civil rights.

Pete Seeger is, from what I've read about him, very stubborn, which is another way I am like him. Once he set his mind to something, he is determined to do it. For instance, he was committed to cleaning up the Hudson River. So many people said "You can't do this Pete." But he proved them wrong. He got his family together, and they built a sloop that they named The Clearwater. They went sailing up and down the river, trying to stimulate people to help.

Today, Clearwater still sails, the Hudson River is cleaner, fish are starting to come back, and I finally learned the meaning behind one of my favorite Pete Seeger songs, *Sailing up*. This I can also connect with, because two of my values are repairing the world, and guarding the earth. Although I don't know whether or not I would have gone to such extremes to do it, I still agree with his motives.

I learned that Pete still lives out in the woods, with his wife Toshi, and that even at 90 years old he still plays for others. For example, I recently went to his 90th birthday celebration at Madison Square Garden. Pete worries that he is losing his voice, and will no longer be able to sing as well as he used to. At the concert, he said, "I can't sing as well as I used to, but I can still accompany **you**." To me, that doesn't matter.

I didn't care what he played, or how he played it. I went there to see this legend, my role model in action. And, of course, to sing with him. He has done so much in his life, and has helped make some of the great changes in this country. I hope I can help the world the way he did.

He did a performance of *We Shall Overcome* in front of Martin Luther King Jr., and later, King was in a car getting a ride home, and he said "We shall overcome, that song really sticks with you doesn't it." [cue Ryan playing *We Shall Overcome*]