

Brooklynn Richard  
The Willow School, New Orleans, LA  
9th Grade

### **“Fragments of Freedom”**

Freedom is usually described as the ability to do what you want. But I define freedom differently. To me, freedom is the ability to live without fear, to be treated with dignity, and to have real choices without restraints. It’s not just comfort or convenience. It is security, protection beneath the law, and the chance to pursue opportunity. True freedom means your life isn’t controlled by violence, discrimination, or injustice.

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s–70s, Americans fought openly and courageously for those freedoms. Leaders and ordinary citizens marched, protested, and risked their lives to demand equality. Their freedom was not guaranteed; it had to be claimed. Compared to that time, Americans today have more legal protections and greater access to education, voting rights, and public spaces. Their courage helped expand and move the country closer to its ideals.

However, I do not believe that Americans are simply “more” or “less” free than they were during the Civil Rights Movement. Instead, I believe freedom has changed its form. The most tangible legal barriers may have fallen, but new challenges have emerged—economic inequality, misinformation, political division, and the powerful influence of technology over how we think and communicate. The ground zero has shifted, even as the struggle continues.

Reading *Soldiers and Kings* by Jason De Leon deeply shaped my understanding of this idea. This nonfiction book follows migrants who risk their lives traveling through Mexico in hopes of reaching the United States. Many face violence, exploitation, and death for the chance of safety and opportunity. Their journeys reveal a stark truth: while some people debate the abstract ideas of liberty online, others are still fighting for the basic forms of freedom—survival and security. Seeing this contrast made me understand how uneven freedom truly is.

My generation has grown up with extraordinary access to information and free expression. We can share opinions almost instantly and communicate with people continents away. These are powerful freedoms. But because we did not personally fight for many of our civil rights, we can sometimes treat them casually. Serious issues can become trends. Outrage fades fairly quickly. We may assume our freedoms are permanent because we have always known them—I have even seen people online joke that something as simple as saying a foreign word could get them “deported.” While meant humorously, deportation is not a joke for many families. For some, it is the fear of losing home, safety, and everything familiar.

Freedom should not feel divided. It should not depend on your zip code, your race, your income, or where you were born. It should not feel secure for some and uncertain for

others. When someone lives in fear of deportation, discrimination, or instability, their freedom is only partial. And when freedom is partial for some, it is weakened for all.

The people who marched during the Civil Rights Movement understood that freedom was not meant to be experienced halfway. They refused to accept being treated as fractions instead of full citizens. Their courage reminds us that freedom is not just a legal status; it is a human feeling—a right. It is the ability to wake up without fear and move through the world knowing you belong.

If I were to create a slogan for my generation, it would be: “Whole People, Whole Freedom.”

This slogan means that freedom must make a person feel complete. If someone has rights but not safety, a voice but not respect, opportunity but not access, they are not fully free. My campaign would challenge my peers to look beyond their own comfort and ask who around them is still living only half free. It would push us to learn, to listen, and to care deeply enough to protect freedom for others, not just ourselves

Freedom has changed forms over time, but its purpose has always been the same: to allow people to live fully and openly as themselves. Until every person can say they feel whole—not half protected, not half heard, not half safe—the work of civil rights is not finished. Because freedom is not real when it is divided. It is only real when it makes us whole.