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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

My Father Died in Afghanistan, and I Support Colin Kaepernick

By Kelly Mchugh-Stewart

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I went to my first Kansas City Chiefs football game in December 2010, six months after my father, Army Col. John McHugh, had been killed by a suicide bomber in Kabul, Afghanistan. The team sent my newly minted Gold Star family pregame field passes and seats only a few rows behind the team's bench.

When we got to our seats after spending pregame on the field, I knew the national anthem was coming — and I knew how hearing this song would make me feel. (Even today, I still can't listen to "The Star-Spangled Banner" without crying.) But when we stood to listen to the Eli Young Band, everything went wrong. They got the second verse wrong, and then got it wrong again when they did it over.

"Get off the field, you're drunk!" yelled a woman behind us who sported red-and-yellow face paint and seemed drunk herself.

Once the band finally reached the end of the song, instead of singing "home of the brave," the entire stadium screamed "home of the Chiefs!" They had replaced "brave" — a word that, to me, represented my father, a man who spent 24 years in the military and gave his life for the country — with a mascot. My blood boiled.

"They do it at every game," my boyfriend at the time whispered to me. Like it was no big deal. Just a football thing.

The following year, I enrolled for college at Kansas State University, some 130 miles west of Arrowhead Stadium. At my first Wildcat football game in Bill Snyder Family Stadium, as I barely held myself together during the national anthem, the purple clad K-State fans shouted "Chiefs" in place of "brave." *We're not even at a Chiefs game*, I thought. Again, my blood boiled.

When it comes to "disrespecting the national anthem," people have been doing it for a long time. They do it because they're drunk or because it's tradition or because they just spent \$200 on tickets and they are pumped to be in a stadium alongside tens of thousands of other fans. I

worked in both professional and collegiate athletics for five years, and in both venues, I never felt like “The Star-Spangled Banner” got the respect it deserved. To the average fan, I observed, it was just something to get through before the main event.

So, I’m surprised at the number of white people on my Facebook feed who are offended because black football players are kneeling for the national anthem. As a Gold Star daughter — and, to be clear, I am not speaking for all Gold Star families — I’m not offended by what is happening in the N.F.L. right now. At least these players are “disrespecting” the national anthem for a cause.

Not once during these peaceful protests have I gotten the sense that the players’ intention is to disrespect the military. Not once did I feel that they were taking my father’s ultimate sacrifice for granted. Rather, they were exercising the exact freedoms my father gave his life for.

Protests are not supposed to be comfortable. They are supposed to incite change — and what these players are doing is working. Everywhere you look someone is talking about racism in the United States, all because a group of athletes have taken a stand. Whether it offends you or not, this is what a successful protest looks like.

Someone I know on Facebook wrote this:

So many better ways they could be helping their “cause” they could use their time and money to make their point or make a difference, but oh wait ... that would require some sort of effort or sacrifice on their part. Does this get attention? Sure. But probably not the right kind. And it’s certainly not going to create any change.

Sure these “spoiled babies” (words I pulled from a different Facebook post) could do other things to make statements, like donate money to causes or maybe make a statement in a news conference. (By the way, they’ve been doing these things for a long time already.) But the audience they are targeting by kneeling will never see those other efforts. The family sitting next to me at a restaurant, this Facebook friend of mine, the president of the United States of America — perhaps none of them would be talking about it without those protests.

My Facebook poster writes, “it’s certainly not going to create any change.” But I have to disagree. It has changed me. When the former 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick knelt for the first time during the national anthem last year, it made me angry. I wanted to scream at the television: “How could he! My father died for this country!” But when I finally stepped back and looked deeply into why he was kneeling, I realized it was not my place to be upset. It was not my place to tell other Americans how to exercise their rights.

To those who criticize Mr. Kaepernick: Before posting your rant, consider why these football players are kneeling. Try to understand their side. Read James Baldwin or Toni Morrison or Margo Jefferson; I guarantee you will look at things differently.

And consider this: The president of the United States is more outraged by the actions of football players than by the actions of white supremacists. Let that sink in. Is there anything more offensive to the United States military than flying the American flag next to the Nazi flag? Talk about spitting on my father's grave. President Trump gave white supremacists a pat on the hand, while black N.F.L. players get called "sons of bitches." If that's not proof of racial inequality in America, I'm not sure what is.

I will always respect my country's flag and national anthem. To me they are the symbols of freedom, of my dad's sacrifice. But my father did not die for symbols. He died for people. He died for the rights of all Americans, regardless of their race or religion. Right now, some Americans still face inequality. So they protest and create change. And I applaud them.

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