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"I AM DESERVING"

"FEELINGS ARE TEMPORARY"

"TIME IS CONSTANT"

"LOVE IS REAL"

LIFE OF SUNYA

"LET IT BE"

FROM THE NEW KID TO AN ACTIVIST,
MEET SENIOR SUNYA HARDI

He is an artist. He is an activist. He fights for his own life while also fighting for others. He is senior Sunya Hardi. He may be leaving East High School, but his journey is just the beginning.

Hardi was born and raised in Des Moines by his mother who escaped from the Lao Civil War. Growing up as half Chinese and half Lao, he felt more connected to his Lao family and the culture. At a young age, his parents got divorced, which impacted him emotionally and mentally. He felt a lack of sense of belonging both at home and school. Because of the divorce, Hardi grew up only with his mother.

"She's the most hard working, most amazing, loving person I know. She literally built herself up from the ground. She escaped an entire Civil War, crossed the Mekong river to go into a refugee camp in Thailand, spending six months there. She came all the way to America, learned a whole new language while in a new place, scared and young," Hardi said.

Hardi's mother is someone that he looks like up to and everything that he does is for her.

"She made a life for herself out of nothing and that is so commemorative that she traveled across an entire ocean and survived bullets from the Pathet Lao," Hardi said.

Before becoming a student at East, Hardi attended a different district. Hardi described it being one of the worst experiences he's ever faced.

"I was nothing like my peers because there was no diversity (there). I experienced racist, homophobic, transphobic harassment constantly," Hardi said.

While attending the school before East, Hardi was only seen as 'the Asian kid', 'the trans kid', or 'the gay kid'. It was hard for him to find people that he can relate to and felt a lack of belonging there.

"Those kids have just not been exposed to other people, they do not know how to treat someone who doesn't look like or identify like them," Hardi said.

While experiencing a difficulty feeling of belonging, Hardi experienced sexual and emotional abuse from someone he thought loved him. Hardi was a sophomore at the time and his abuser was a senior. The relationship started as love and was going well, but that is what abuse looks like in the beginning.

"I am a rape survivor. He didn't want me to go to college, didn't want me to have a life outside of him," Hardi said.

When his abuser left him, Hardi attempted suicide which caused him to end up at the hospital. Because of this tragedy, he transferred to East.

"I only bring up all of this stuff because it's shaped who I am now. If I hadn't been abused, met my abuser and attempted suicide, I wouldn't have ended up at East. I've literally never been

happier; never had friends and I'm constantly inspired by amazing people around me. My teachers are human here and they care about you outside academically. I feel like East saved my life," Hardi said.

Being at East, Hardi has met some of his best friends, the people that care the most about him.

"He hypes me up, he holds me accountable, he keeps me in check, he makes me a better person," senior Bimta Subba said.

Not only is Hardi a survivor but he was assigned female at birth but has identifies as male. Hardi questioned his gender identity at a young age after watching the Disney movie Mulan.

"I felt really connected to her being this young kid who connected to her pretending to be a man," Hardi said.

Hardi started questioning his identity and sexuality in middle school. In the eighth grade he knew for sure he was a male. However, he was outed without his consent by one of his peers.

"I feel like there would be so much harmony between trans people and cis people if there was more education (over it)," Hardi said.

For the next few years, Hardi faced harassment and transphobic comments. He was even called names and got dirty looks for even going to the men's bathroom. At first, Hardi's family was not receptive at all. Transness did not exist in his community and it was unspeakable. Being gay was seen as weird and unacceptable.

"There's hope for people who think that their families are going to hate them, reject them, disown them but it takes time cause at the end of the day if your family is really your family, they're going to learn to love you despite whatever they feel about your identity," Hardi said.

Despite everything Hardi has faced, he has grown into the person that he wants to become.

By attending East, not only has he been a part of activities such as IHSSA, or being the president of the art club, but he has

also been a part of climate activism. In one of his classes, two Sunrise advocates came to talk to his class about the importance of the green new deal and seeing if they can get students to participate in Sunrise.

"I was so inspired by young faces of color talking about how rich white men have screwed over this generation with their fossil fuel incentives chasing after the bag, how that's ruined our present and will destroy our future. Given the

opportunity to use my voice, to speak up and to try to facilitate to at least be on the right side of history," Hardi said.

The Sunrise Movement is an army of young people working to fight against climate change. They also create millions of good-paying jobs in the process and grow their power through talking to communities. They've organized on national and local levels and hosted large and small actions to make a change.

"I want to be involved in the political and social landscape in this nation wherever it goes. I've got a voice; everyone has a voice. You got to be the change you want to see in the world," Hardi said.

Hardi is also a part of another climate activism organization called US Youth Climate Strike. They are a strong grassroots movement fighting for fundamental change. Through Sunrise, Hardi got to go to Philadelphia in January for a sunrise high school and middle school training. Learning organizing techniques, recruiting techniques and how to facilitate and escalate an action. He also got to travel to Washington D.C. in February which he was one of 20 facilitators for managing group discussions of 150 kids.

"Activism makes me feel like it is possible to live in a society as long as it has potential for change. As long as the people are full of hope. Activism has given me hope. I don't think I will feel complete as a person," Hardi said.

Hardi has shown dedication to climate activism by getting the word out to his peers. He is seen going to classrooms talking for a few minutes hoping to inspire his peers into taking action.

"He has a positive aura around him (which) makes me want to do my best and I also want him to do his best, we're each other's support system," senior Kathy Le said.

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In the fall, Hardi will be attending Iowa State University for Biological Premedical Illustration. It is a specialized job in the medical field. He will be making diagrams and animations for medical education or research. After he will

be hoping to attend the University of Chicago for their medical illustration graduate program.

"Everyone as a human being has a right to their pursuit of happiness and one day you will find that happiness. You'll find that self-fulfillment. No matter how long it takes. As long as you have the drive to love yourself and put yourself first," Hardi said.