

Stepping **UP** by Stepping **DOWN**

BY JACOB FULLMER AND PATRICIA FARNSWORTH

Andrea was awarded a gold medal but made national news by giving it away.

Sometimes standing as a witness of God can happen in unexpected ways. For Andrea, it meant stepping up by stepping down.

It's the moment every high school athlete dreams of: cameras flashing, parents beaming, coaches applauding, a gold medal, laced with a ribbon, gently placed around your neck. But for Andrea Nelson, it just wasn't right.

All runners had crossed the line for the girls' 3,200-meter race at the Washington State High School Track and Field Championships. They had just caught their breath when

the whispers started. Someone would be disqualified.

"Is it me?" each girl asked herself. They then waited in uncertainty for more than an hour.

At last, a judge ruled that the first-place runner, Nicole, would lose her place. She had supposedly stepped outside the lane for three consecutive steps. The other runners would move up, taking the stand one place



Andrea Nelson (wearing green) knows what it's like to work hard and receive the benefits of that effort.



Right after this picture was taken, Andrea jumped down and ran to give the first-place medal to the disqualified runner she felt rightfully earned it.

higher than the order in which they crossed the finish line. Andrea had finished three seconds behind Nicole but would now be given first place.

At that moment two-time state cross country champion Andrea Nelson (17) of the Woodridge Ward, Spokane North Stake, made a decision that would catch the attention of out-of-state newspapers, land her on ESPN, and even cause her to be featured in *Sports Illustrated* magazine.

“My coach asked, ‘What are you going to do?’ I said, ‘Well, I’m going to give her the medal,’” Andrea remembers saying.

After being given the gold medal, she jumped without hesitation from the highest stand, ran over to Nicole and placed the medal around her neck, saying it belonged to her because she won the race.

The energy from Andrea’s simple gesture started a domino effect of selfless giving. Next, the second-place runner gave up her medal to Andrea, followed by third to second, and so on, until all eight girls gave up their medals. The eighth-place girl, who chose to forfeit her medal without

a replacement in mind, later received a medal Nicole won in another race.

Andrea’s mother, Edie, says, “There is no way to describe how that felt and the way that people were responding. You just had to be there.” After the runners exchanged medals, Edie says, “A reporter ran past Brother Nelson with tears in his eyes saying he wished he could talk but was on deadline and, besides, he couldn’t get control of his emotions anyway.”

Ten days later, race officials reinstated Nicole as the winner after reviewing video of the race. But at the time Andrea made her decision, no one knew that would happen. The reinstated winner, Nicole, told *Sports Illustrated*, “It gave me chills. It was just an incredible, surprising thing for Andrea to do, because it wasn’t her fault. No one would have blamed her if she kept the medal.”

But Andrea knows how it feels to win a race. And that wasn’t what she felt that day. To her, violation or not, the other girl had earned a spot on the stand. “I’d rather win it the right way instead of having it given to me,” she

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says. She understands the Savior’s counsel: “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them” (Matthew 7:12).

One in a Crowd

For a girl nearly through high school, Andrea has received a lot of attention. After the track meet and before the beginning of summer vacation, newspapers and sports-writers were calling her high school to get her out of class as many as three times in a day. “I wasn’t expecting this to be a big deal. I just thought it was the right thing to do.”

Andrea is accustomed to doing what’s right—even if it’s different from what her peers are doing. Out of 1,400 students in her high school, she’s one of fewer than 20

Latter-day Saints, so she has plenty of opportunities to quietly stand up for what she believes. She knows that standing strong is the best way to avoid bad situations. “Just live the standards and make sure people know what they are. Don’t be afraid to say, ‘Hey I’m not going to watch that. I’m not going to listen to that. I’m not going to do that,’” she says.

Some friends, upon learning she was LDS, were a little taken aback at first, but then they realized she was still just their friend Andrea. She says, “Now they’re OK with it and have really started to accept what I do.”

Standing for Truth

Andrea has learned in her Young Women classes how important it is to “stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and



Andrea holding her second-place medal. She tries to set a good example because she’s grateful for the examples in her life, like her brothers and sisters.

in all places” (Mosiah 18:9; see also this year’s Mutual theme, 1 Timothy 4:12). Recently, she invited a friend to a Church activity who previously didn’t think very highly of the Church. “She thought the activity was really cool. She was really interested in the Church and asked a lot of questions,” says Andrea.

Her friends on the track team know her standards, too. “We have a lot of movie nights, and they know I always have to make sure what we’re watching is appropriate,” she says. “If they are watching something I wouldn’t watch and I walk in the room, they change it really quick. That’s really nice.”

She credits her older sister for paving the way with some of her teammates. Her sister ran for their high school the year before Andrea started running, and she also made her standards clear. In fact, all five of her brothers and sisters have been runners. She looks up to them on and off the track.

“They’re amazing. They’ve all been great examples. They’re always doing the right thing, and they make sure I’m doing the right thing,” she says.

Matching Strides

Her family has done a lot to set the pace for her, but being the youngest has also provided her with opportunities to be an example for them. “She always sets a good example. My children always seem to want to do what Andrea’s doing,” says her oldest sister, Christine.

But being looked up to or talked about isn’t really what motivates Andrea. When people mention her giving up the medal, she doesn’t break stride: “I don’t want to be the center of attention.” That’s Andrea. Like the eight other runners who followed her example, she’s just



Andrea gives her best in every race she runs.

glad she could do the right thing when the moment presented itself.

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