

## From the HEAD OF SCHOOL



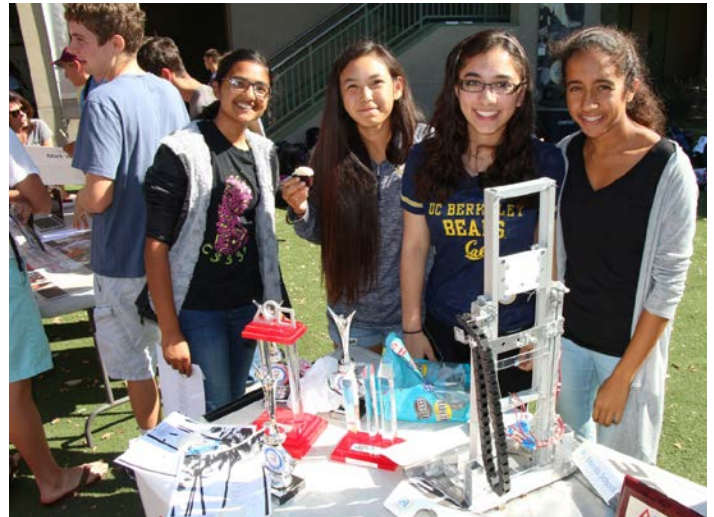
### Making Ethical Choices: From the Afghani Mountains to Menlo Classrooms

Sad to say but my workout life, once made up of team games and world-class competition, has been reduced to a

maintenance weightlifting routine two days a week and hours spent on our elliptical training machine at home.

The consolation is that those hours on the elliptical are when I allow myself the guilty pleasure of watching action movies and bad television. During a recent workout I watched *Lone Survivor*, an action film whose story is based on the events of a Navy SEAL combat operation in Afghanistan in 2005.

The story centers on Marcus Luttrell, one of a team of four Navy SEALs deployed to the mountains above a remote Afghan village, where suspected Taliban leaders were positioned. Not long into the mission, three Afghani goatherds stumbled upon the SEAL Team and were quickly captured. Forced to decide whether to kill or release the



prisoners, one member of the team voted to release, one to kill, one abstained—the decision, according to Luttrell, was left to him. He decided to release them. Within an hour, the team was surrounded by Taliban forces who, Luttrell assumed, were alerted by the goatherds. A firefight ensued and Luttrell's three team members were mortally wounded. During the operation, the forward base launched a Chinook helicopter and 16 corpsmen in a rescue attempt. Tragically, a rocket-propelled grenade destroyed the helicopter during the attempt, and all lives aboard were lost. Luttrell, through some amazing heroism on his part and incredible compassion on the part of an entire Afghani village, was saved and eventually rescued.

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A few years ago I watched Harvard ethicist Michael Sandel use this film as a case study with an audience. After introducing the initial ethical dilemma of whether to kill or release the goatherds, Sandel asked the audience to take a stand on which option they would choose and be prepared to defend their decision. Most of the audience sided with Luttrell and chose to release the prisoners, citing practical considerations (Luttrell and his team could have gone to

jail for killing non-combatants), ethical considerations (killing an innocent without knowing of their wrongdoing is not a defensible act), and moral considerations (killing is wrong in all instances). Some on the other side argued that the killings would be justified because, though it would cost three lives, killing the goatherds may save three other lives. But this group then struggled with follow-up questions about whether the value of all lives is equal and, if not, who decides which life is worth more.

Sandel then revealed that Luttrell's three team members were killed and asked whether anyone in the audience was prepared to change their "vote" based on the new information. Some were, some were not, and an incredibly thoughtful discussion ensued. Sandel then revealed that 16 more lives were lost when the Chinook helicopter was destroyed and asked again whether anyone would change their decision. Without ever revealing his own answer, Sandel continually drove the audience to define the principles behind their logic—the assumptions on which their decision rested—and to clarify what they believed and why they believed it, over and over again. The discussion was fascinating to watch as well as to participate in within my own head. It was both a superb and disturbing lesson in practical ethics and an outstanding example of great teaching: relevant, real-world content; student-centered; challenging and rigorous—all evoked by incredibly thoughtful questions from the teacher.

This may surprise you to read, but in my view the purpose of a Menlo School education is not to give our students the answers to the questions that Professor Sandel asked. While we hope that our students would give thoughtful answers and make principle-based decisions, we know we are not



going to launch them into the next phase of their lives with THE answer to questions like whether to release or kill prisoners who may pose a threat to you and your brothers in arms.

Instead, we endeavor as a school to give students a firm foundation from which to develop the capacity to think through difficult, perhaps even life-altering, questions such as these. We would hope that graduates leave us with a firm base of *possible* answers based on literature they have read where characters wrestled with similar questions of justice; on philosophical underpinnings derived from their study of World Religions, history and philosophy itself; and through exposure to other, similar ethical dilemmas such as the ones they found in their science courses. The analytical thinking and ability to break larger questions into their component parts that we teach so well in our mathematics courses; the empathetic thinking we teach through our humanities courses, student life curriculum and service learning initiatives; and the creative thinking our arts program teaches that pushes students to view challenges in such a way that new solutions may appear: these are the elements we hope to equip our students with going forward.

We hope that none of our children ever have to face the kind of decision Marcus Luttrell had to face. But the world today is more likely to ask these kinds of questions than the ones our students already know the answers to.

And we hope to get them ready to answer.

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KnightLine is published in .pdf form on the Menlo School website each month, with an email alert including a link sent to all parents. For questions, please contact Alex Perez, Director of Communications, via email at [alex.perez@menloschool.org](mailto:alex.perez@menloschool.org) or by calling 650.330.2001 ext. 2330.

