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Rhetorical Analysis: Never Give Up

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Rhetorical Analysis: Never Give Up

Writing Process

For this English 100 assignment, we were asked to write a rhetorical analysis of a speech of our choice. I knew I wanted to pick one that would be interesting to me. Prior to writing this paper, I had heard about the speech once before when watching a sports documentary. I knew the speech had a strong message at its core, but I did not know why it was so respected and liked by its audience. While writing this paper I had three drafts, the first two drafts were peer edited. The second and third were also edited and graded by my professor. The first draft was just an outline of the direction I wanted my paper to take that allowed me to get all of my ideas down. The second draft was where I was able to really dive into the rhetorical tools used by Valvano in his speech. The third draft was a cleaning up and final organization of my paper. The multiple draft system was very useful to helping me develop my paper; the peer and teacher edits were very valuable.

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Never Give Up

Jack Milliken

The power of the rhetorical appeal pathos is key to any speech that has the intention to motivate someone to action. On March 4, 1993, Jim Valvano gave a powerful speech at the first Excellence in Sports Performance Yearly Award ceremony, commonly called the ESPYs. Valvano was a successful men's college basketball coach, who in 1983 led his North Carolina State University team to a Cinderella story victory over the University of Houston for the National Collegiate Athletic Association title. Valvano was announced as the winner of the Arthur Ashe Courage Award for an individual who "possesses strength in the face of adversity, courage in the face of peril and the willingness to stand up for their beliefs no matter the cost" (Arthur Ashe Award). Only nine months earlier, Valvano was diagnosed with metastatic adenocarcinoma glandular cancer, which would eventually spread to his bones. To even make it up the few stage steps to accept the award, he needed the help of a colleague. His weakened physical condition and a flashing cue from the teleprompter saying "30 seconds" didn't stop Valvano from giving what is now known as one of the most powerful ESPYs speeches of all time. Valvano announced to the audience, "I'm going to speak longer than anybody else has spoken tonight." During his speech, he challenged the audience to live fuller lives while announcing the start of the V Foundation.

To challenge the audience to live fuller lives, Valvano proposed three simple propositions everyone should do on a daily basis. If a person does these three things, in the words of Valvano, "That's a heck of a day. You do that seven days a week, you're going to have something special." To achieve this fuller and more meaningful life, Valvano gave the audience the following advice:

To me, there are three things we all should do every day. We should do this every day of our lives. Number one is laugh. You

should laugh every day. Number two is think. You should spend some time in thought. Number three is you should have your emotions moved to tears, could be happiness or joy.

To show the audience the importance of these three propositions, Valvano used the rhetorical appeal of pathos. With pathos, Valvano moved the audience to an emotional state where they could see the power of these propositions. Throughout his speech, Valvano used this appeal effectively and compelled the audience to live life to the fullest, even in the midst of going through great hardship.

Valvano first targeted the emotion of happiness by making his audience laugh with and at him. Considering the tragic situation he was in, Valvano was still able to see the importance of this emotion. To show the power of this emotion to the audience, Valvano told a short story about his coaching idol Vince Lombardi and the first speech Valvano gave while coaching freshman basketball at Rutgers University. He modeled his speech after one that Vince Lombardi gave his players—that all they would need to be successful throughout the year is “your family, your religion and the Green Bay Packers.” Valvano decided he would say the same but substitute Rutgers basketball for the Green Bay Packers. Yet in the heat of the moment, Valvano accidentally said, “and the Green Bay Packers.” The ESPY audience roared with laughter at this short story, and Valvano was able to laugh at himself. This emotional appeal to joy was very effective in capturing the attention of the audience. The short story also allowed the audience to relate to Valvano and see he was a person who makes mistakes. Then, he made the audience laugh again by telling them about the teleprompter’s flashing message telling him to finish up. Valvano responded with, “Va fa Napoli, buddy. You got a lot.” This saying identified heavily with Valvano’s Italian roots. It translates literally to “Go to Naples,” but any Italian knows this is another way to say, “Go to Hell.” This lighthearted comment showed the joy Valvano still had. Again, he was targeting the emotion of happiness by making the audience laugh. Valvano knew he was very ill, but even as his death approached, he still had the goal of moving the audience to see the good in their lives. Valvano not only got the audience to laugh, but also demonstrated where he came from, an important aspect when it came to spending time in thought.

Valvano again moved the audience using pathos, telling them to live life with a sense of enthusiasm. Even while facing down the thought of death, Valvano

didn't descend into hopeless depression. To achieve this enthusiasm, he stated that everyone must spend some time every day in thought: "Where you started, where you are and where you're going to be." Valvano said he knew where he was then, sick and dying of cancer, but he asked, "How do you go from where you are to where you want to be?" To answer this, Valvano told the audience members, "Have an enthusiasm for life. You have to have a dream, a goal. You have to be willing to work for it." Valvano was able to look beyond the current situation and focus on a goal of where he wanted to be. Valvano was no stranger to publicly showing his emotions. In 1983, seconds after his team's buzzer-beater win over Houston, Valvano was caught on film frantically running up and down the court waving his arms. It was said that Valvano was looking for someone to hug (Remembering Jim). Again, Valvano was using his own situation to convey to others how to get through their own hard times. He targeted the audience's emotions of hope while trying to inspire them to live their own dreams.

Furthermore, to live out his own dream, Valvano announced the creation of the Jimmy V Foundation, whose goal, with the help of ESPN, would be to raise awareness and money for cancer research.

Finally, for Valvano's last proposition, he didn't come out and just tell the audience to cry. Instead, without the audience even noticing it, he had already moved their emotions, in most cases to tears. Valvano used his social platform and the emotional atmosphere of the audience to call for help in the battle against cancer. Valvano acknowledged that his foundation was too late to save his life, but it would open the gateway for others to have a fighting chance: "It may not save my life. It may save my children's lives. It may save someone you love." The emotions shifted from hope and enthusiasm to sadness. Yet even in the presence of tremendous fear and uncertainty, Valvano was able to reach out and achieve his goal. Here, Valvano used the emotional weakness of the audience to create an environment that would help advance the fight against cancer.

The foundation has the motto "Don't give up. Don't ever give up!" (Remembering Jim), a saying common to cancer survivors. Valvano closed his speech with a compelling statement about cancer: "Cancer can take away all my physical abilities. It cannot touch my mind; it cannot touch my heart; and it cannot touch my soul. And those three things are going to carry on forever." Finishing off his emotional call for help in the fight against cancer, Valvano inspired a great sense of hope to his audience—a hope that brought support for his

foundation. The audience was brought to its feet with full applause while Valvano was helped off stage.

Laughing, thinking, and allowing one's emotions to be moved are vital to living the fullest life. Jim Valvano realized this during the final months of his life and encouraged others to have a positive outlook. Jim Valvano hoped to leave an impact on the world by creating the Jimmy V Foundation. Although Jim Valvano died less than two months after giving this speech, his legacy will live on forever.

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