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Lighting the Fire of a Million Sparks

It takes just a few sparks to start a whole fire. No matter who a person is or where they come from, the power of the collective does not just stem from numbers but from the relationships that individuals can build with one another. The power of the collective can be seen both within larger and smaller contexts, relying on shared and timeless cultural values. The theme of a small yet powerful group of people coming together to fight for their values and rights can be seen in *The Nightwatchman* by Louise Erdrich, a novel deeply rooted in the struggle of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians against the federal government of the United States. This use of the collective in terms of the novel's characters, like Thomas Wazhashk and Patrice Paranteau, echoes many stories of the past and present where collective action is used as a force for justice and equity.

In my hometown of Miami, Florida, the power of the collective group was evident in the way that true Miamians from different cultural backgrounds came and continue to come together to solve the environmental issues that plague our community. I have witnessed adults and students create the sparks for change, forming a collective group, pooling resources, raising awareness, and stopping projects that have threatened to harm our natural environments. One pertinent example that comes to any Miamian's mind is an event from 2023, where students, activists, and community members came together to protest, sign petitions, and end the plans of the water amusement park that Miami Metro Zoo was planning to build. The proposed project was named "Miami Wilds," which would have been built on 27.5 acres of land, threatening endangered and protected species. A group of teenagers from different schools, economic backgrounds, and cultural values even organized a protest on the land and spoke with state congressional representatives and activists who played a role in the construction of the water park not moving forward. This event demonstrated to these groups of students that their voices could cause change and support their values, leading them to move forward and help advocate for environmental solutions such as the Juliana Resolution, speaking to members of the United States Congress about these environmental and social issues.

In smaller contexts, the power of collective voices can still have an equally significant impact. In my own family, there is a stark difference between the values of each generation, with some individuals being more open-minded than others. Being from a large family of Jamaican descent, there are clear values that previous generations hold that conflict with the values of my generation, including opinions on when to start a family or how to approach the topic of someone being part of the LGBTQ+ community. As one of the few people who identify with this community in my family, the power of collective action was essential in helping my family members understand the importance of acceptance and inclusivity. I witnessed cousins, aunts, and uncles come together to accept that everyone holds different identities, and they continue to advocate together for the acceptance of these differences. Without them, I genuinely believe that

some members of my family would still have ideas rooted in their past, being even more hesitant or unwilling to accept individuals who do not fit the mold of their definition of “normal.”

These continuing examples of the power of collectives draw a parallel to the themes of *The Night Watchman*, where people of the community can collectively protect their land, home, environment, and cultural values by causing a spark and fighting against the federal termination policy brought about by the United States government. The Turtle Mountain Band’s struggle against the United States government was not simply a legal, political, or economic fight. It was a fight for survival, a battle to maintain their home, and a struggle to preserve their cultural identity and community. Their collective fight caused a fire against a system that sought to erase their existence as sovereign people with their own cultural identity and that sought to ignore the history of injustices brought against all Indian peoples.

All uses of collective actions for justice and equity demonstrate the importance of trust and shared perspectives to defend deeply ingrained connections to the values each group considers part of their identity. In all instances, the power of the collective stems not from numbers but from a deep commitment to the cause that each group was fighting for, supported by shared cultural values. This emphasizes that a true sense of purpose can transform a collective idea into a powerful force of individuals for justice, demonstrating that the ability to foster relationships can create a strong foundation for action, lighting a fire for change.

On a much larger scale, these stories and others like these raise important questions about justice and equity. Both the Turtle Mountain Band of the Chippewa tribe in North Dakota, the students fighting for increased environmental awareness, and even my own family were fighting against much larger systems of power, including the federal government and corporate interests. However, both “underdogs” in these fights for justice highlighted the importance of organizing to address the systematic imbalances of power and justice, empowering their communities to protect their internal values and cultures from external forces. In a world where larger systems and forces of power often put out the sparks fighting for justice and marginalize minorities and vulnerable communities, these examples remind individuals of the power of collective action and the importance of the relationships that individuals build with one another. In terms of issues of ideas in the past, present, or future, these empowering stories of *The Night Watchman*, the students of Miami-Dade, and the stories of my own family illuminate the timeless truth that uniting around a common cause can be powerful enough to reshape the course of history.