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The Kibera School for Girls is a primary school located in one of the poorest and largest slums in Africa. Kids pick their ways around the sewage that runs down Kibera's narrow alleyways. Hundreds of thousands of people live in long, corrugated metal sheds, subdivided into 10'X10' rooms that serve as homes for six to ten people or even more. Access to water, sanitation, electricity, healthcare, and jobs, is scarce.

The SHOFCO organization, founded by Kennedy Odede and other members of the local community, started the Kibera School for Girls with a kindergarten class, and added a new class each year. Eight years later, when the first cohort of girls were ready to graduate and join Kenya's public high school system, I was privileged to be part of a team looking into ways to continue to support our girls after they graduated. I remembered Sugihara's story, and Sylvia's contest, and suggested that we bring it to Kenya. We opened the contest not only to our own graduates but also to other students from Kibera who passed Kenya's rigorous high school entrance exams and were able to matriculate with SHOFCO's support. In subsequent years, we opened it to students in a comparable program in Burundi. Burundi ranks as one of the two or three poorest countries in the world, and has been wracked with war and ethnic violence within the memory of the student essayists.

The contest prompts students to write about ethical dilemmas they've had to deal with themselves, or that have been faced by people they know personally. Sometimes, particularly for students in Burundi, the dilemmas they've written about are actual life-or-death situations calling for true heroism. Much more often, the situations involve standing up for a friend, struggling with drug addiction, sacrificing a personal opportunity to help a family member. The winning essays aren't judged based on how dire the situation was, but on how thoughtfully the student considers and articulates the ethical issues at stake, and how effectively they make the argument that their subject did the right thing despite difficult circumstances.

But in one memorable year, the overall winner did write about a true hero. He described an incident in a period of ethnic violence a decade earlier. A neighbor, from a different tribe, had risked his life by hiding the boy and his family in a basement. The prizes that year were presented by a teacher and judge from Rwanda, who had himself been saved from ethnic violence in his country a generation earlier. In his address, that teacher talked about Sugihara, another person from a different tribe, who had nevertheless saved Sylvia and thousands like her, in a previous generation.

Ethical dilemmas are not just the province of heroes. But heroes, like that neighbor in Burundi, or the unknown people who saved our judge in Rwanda, or Chiune Sugihara, give all of us something to think about, and something to aspire to.