

# [***I Was the Covington Catholic Student. I Refuse to Capitulate***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B4F-NFR1-DY68-1007-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Length:** 2323 words

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**Highlight:** You wake up believing that 150 million people think you're a vile racist. It's almost impossible to put into words how that feels.

**Body**

My Catholic faith has been present from the beginning of all that happened to me. The day after the incident at the Lincoln Memorial, with the help of Scott Jennings, I released my first written statement. It all came from me. They were my words.

I mentioned that I was praying when Nathan Phillips was up in front of me. I was praying for the situation to be done with.

I'd never been out of our northern Kentucky bubble before, which is very German Catholic and completely different to DC in all ways. Someone coming up off the street and confronting me like that, and not having a chaperone intervene, was a novel experience.

I was accused of stealing Phillips' talking points about the incident because he had been beating a drum in a prayer of his own. The immediate response to me—even though I've been baptized, had my first communion and been confirmed, and go to church every Sunday—was disbelief.

But praying in that moment—which was a weird and unfamiliar situation for me—was a logical reaction. I was applying what I know in response to what I don't know.

The reaction to my statement was frustrating. His story seemed to change between different outlets and networks, whereas my account of what happened has stayed the same from day one.

My faith was questioned, but his never was. I'm not saying his should have been. But it was a double standard.

I remember a lot of things about that day. At the start, my friends from Covington Catholic High School and I were strolling around close to the Washington Monument when a middle-aged lady jogging past yelled at us: "I hope you never get a girl pregnant!"

We all looked at each other and knew we weren't in Catholic northern Kentucky anymore. It was such an unfamiliar experience to be accosted like that without being disrespectful first. That's when it popped into my mind that we were in a politically-charged area.

But we were 16. You're young and naïve, and you don't really understand just how emotional both sides are in issues like abortion. You know why you believe what you do, and that's vital, but you don't comprehend the strength of feeling in response, or that it creates a lot of tension.

After that, we went to the White House and I remember seeing people protesting about all sorts of things, not just the March for Life. It was a circus. There's somebody on every corner and a million things being protested at any given time in DC.

The wheel started to turn a little more in my mind. At the Washington Memorial, we joined the march towards the Capitol building and when I got there I went into the crowd to meet a girl I was dating at the time.

I lost my friends and couldn't find her, so I was alone and worrying about missing the bus home, which was leaving at 5pm from the Lincoln Memorial. My phone had died. I sprinted to the Lincoln Memorial in a panic. But I got there with time to spare.

I remember standing around talking to my teachers and, slowly, students start coming in from different directions. There was a guy on a singular wheel electric skateboard wearing a ski mask and a helmet, playing music. He's an oddball, but whatever: Not the weirdest thing I've seen all day.

And then I noticed the Black Hebrew Israelites who were starting to insult the students. I found out later that with our school was an African-American freshman, aged about 13, who the Black Hebrew Israelites called "Uncle Tom" and other names.

Our teachers told us not to respond to the berating. Instead, we started our high school spirit chants that we do at basketball or football games to drown out the hatred. It was fun, light-hearted stuff. Just boys being dumb, nothing inappropriate.

*We got spirit! Yes we do! We got spirit! How about you!*

And it worked. How do you even respond to that? We threw them off and it was perfect. But it's at this point Nathan Phillips gets the wild idea that the situation is going to descend into a fight between a mob of white kids and a small group of African-Americans.

That was not the case at all; just not going to happen. I can't name a time I ever witnessed a fight in my years at CovCath.

Phillips decides to intercede so he walks over. I'm standing on a set of stairs on a patch of ice. There are people all around me, and I can't really move because I don't want to slip. I see him moving through the crowd with his drum and I'm confused about what's going on. Everyone was bewildered and nobody really knew the gravity of what was going on.

Skipping ahead, we are on the bus back to Kentucky. It was somewhere between two and four in the morning that other students started waking me up and telling me to check [*Twitter*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/twitter?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships). I was like: What are you talking about?

And right then, I see it: The edited, very short video of me at the Lincoln Memorial. I'm scrolling through the replies and see that I'm being compared to lunch counter protests during the civil rights movement. I realized things had gone horribly wrong.

Number one, this was not news. This was a small encounter that does not concern the national public. Second, it was a completely bad—some would say intentional—reframing of what happened.

I was freaking out. How could they have twisted something so innocent and mellow into something so disgusting and ugly? But I was really tired. We'd been sleeping on buses for two days. So I went back to sleep.

We got home to Kentucky before eight in the morning. My mom's in the parking lot and she's freaking out—because I'd lost my wallet. I turned to her and said I don't think that's the biggest problem we have right now.

She's got no idea what I'm talking about. So I give her the most rudimentary description of everything that's going on and that I hadn't done anything wrong, though a bunch of people online were calling me racist. My parents aren't social media people at all.

We go home and I sleep for a couple of hours because I needed it. When I woke up, I immediately wrote a stream of consciousness email to my principal asking him not to do anything without talking to me first because the situation isn't as he may believe.

But the internet had already found out who I was and where we went to school, and his inbox was flooded—so he never saw my email. From there, the media coverage spiralled, and people were reacting to a misrepresentation of what happened.

I don't talk about how it affected me a lot. It's an ongoing thing for me to figure out how to get over it.

At 16, your brain hasn't fully developed. Then suddenly you wake up one day believing that 150 million people—half the country—think you're a vile racist. It's almost impossible to put into words or to explain to somebody else how that feels. But it definitely had an effect on me.

It's a reason why I sued the news organizations that spread the story; it had a clear and demonstrable effect on me. It was sad to have friends come to me worried about what this situation was going to do to me and how it would change my life.

I've always tried to hold the mentality that if I just rolled over and let it all happen—especially if I went to the public to say sorry and beg for forgiveness—then that wouldn't have added any meaning to my situation.

In many ways, capitulating would have been so much worse for me mentally, and wouldn't have worked.

Standing up for myself and adding meaning has been a powerful driver. And my faith has helped; believing that this situation was given to me by a higher power.

As part of our case, we worked with a forensic psychology firm. I met with several doctors and I've talked to other people that have asked me questions and provided good context and ways of thinking about things.

But I've been very resistant and stubborn, kind of classic male stereotype, in that I've wanted to process as much of this mentally on my own, without outside help or taking any over-the-counter prescriptions as a way out.

That's just a personal decision. I didn't want to ever feel like I was doing something that would admit defeat; that they did get a piece of me and I wouldn't be able to reclaim it. I refuse to go down the road of using Valium to sleep, or an antidepressant, or something like that.

So I've dealt with it by talking to people and finding purpose in what I do, and I'll keep figuring it out and moving forward.

People still recognize me and will approach, but the longer it is from the event, the less often that happens. So far, 100 percent of these interactions have been positive. Or, rather, not negative.

It usually goes one of two ways. Either: "What was all that like?" Or: "How much money did you get?" And then it's always the classic line from me: "The terms of the settlement were confidential and we came to a mutual agreement. Stop asking me about that."

My perception of the general conversation online since 2019 is that things have gotten worse. Whenever I open up my phone each day, it feels like people are even more dug into their tribal positions than before. Nobody can seem to agree on a set of facts. There's a disconnect and it's sad.

What gave me hope about my own situation is that many people, [*Republicans*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/republicans?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) and [*Democrats*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/democrats?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), are reasonable and don't tread the party line or buy into it completely.

That's the thing: People usually perceive my incident as a political issue. But it's not. Obviously, I was wearing the red hat, so that added a political shade to it. Really, though, it's a case about me and journalism not done correctly.

It doesn't matter what your political views are. Everybody can be on the same page that what happened to me was wrong. And I've talked to a lot of people who don't believe anything I believe, but said they think I got screwed on this one. That's always been reassuring.

But I think we were wrong to assume that the courts were going to treat us favorably, and there would be these huge payouts.

Some people in the background were telling me we would take them to the cleaners at trial, and it'd hurt the media companies in their pockets so they'd learn. My lawyers were very skeptical about the motivations of the judges who heard my case. Their skepticism proved accurate.

And clearly, that hasn't happened. We were denied in the Sixth Circuit of Appeals and we're now petitioning the [*Supreme Court*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/supreme-court?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships).

You could make the argument that, since me, the same thing is still happening to other people, such as [*Kyle Rittenhouse*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/kyle-rittenhouse?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) and some other lesser-known cases. The media hasn't changed. It's the same as before. Probably worse. But definitely not better.

My advice to someone that goes through something like I did is, number one, you need a good support structure around you. For me, that was my family and a great set of friends; religious people that I trust and could go to. I really needed that.

Another piece of advice is: Don't expect the court to be friendly to you. We thought our case was cut and dried. If this isn't defamation, then what is? That was my thinking.

But you need to be prepared for that long haul, and a support system is essential. There'll be a lot of ups and downs.

Going through that slow court process on your own would be agonizing. People should be mentally prepared for it to last years. It will drag out and you need people that care about you around you.

And one other thing I've done that I would recommend is try to avoid doing media. I stay away unless I see a purpose.

I get a million podcast requests. And I think I could appear on [*Fox*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/fox?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) if I wanted to. I love those people, and there are things where I could provide valuable context or perspective because my situation is unique.

But I generally try to stay away from media unless I can see a clear goal of how it will help, instead of me just being a talking head all the time.

These days, I'm in the last semester of my senior year at college. I'm studying ***politics***, philosophy and economics. I've also been working in ***politics***, which is just as important to me.

I worked my freshman year for then-Senate Majority Leader [*Mitch McConnell*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/mitch-mcconnell?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) (R-KY) on his campaign. I've also worked for Rep. Andy Barr (R-KY), who's our local congressman in Lexington. And I worked for Amb. Kelly Craft on her Republican primary campaign for Kentucky governor.

Everybody comes out of college with a GPA and a list of a few clubs. But I want to leave with a professional resume where I've had salaried roles with experienced colleagues who are a few years older as peers. I'd like to work on Capitol Hill in DC when I graduate.

I took a turn towards ***politics*** in high school, particularly with the March for Life and some of the advice I got after what happened. That was a catalyst.

A friend also introduced me to CovCath's mock trial team and I really enjoyed it. We went to state three years in a row and I won some awards, and it led me to want to be a lawyer.

As a kid, in my head I was like: I get to argue with people for a living and be paid a nice amount of money? Perfect!

But last year I decided not to go to law school. The tuition fees are astronomically high, and I didn't want to be grinding it out for 70 hours a week as a first year lawyer barely earning what I paid in fees.

I spoke to people, including local Catholic priests. They said it was up to me to make something out of what happened and use it as an opportunity. That's what led me to ***politics***.

The motivation for ***politics*** wasn't that I sat around all day and watched Ben Shapiro in high school, though I certainly did. It's connected to my faith and feeling good about myself.

My end goal is to help people by bringing about change in their lives, and I can do that by working with elected representatives.

*Nicholas Sandmann is a student at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. He was the Covington Catholic High School student at the center of a viral video controversy known as the Lincoln Memorial confrontation that took place on January 18, 2019.*

*All views expressed are the author's own.*

*As told to Shane Croucher.*

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[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2337176/nicholas-sandmann.jpg)

**Graphic**

Nicholas Sandmann

Nicholas Sandmann

Nicholas Sandmann became the focus of a media frenzy in January 2019 when he was a high school student after a video of a confrontation at the Lincoln Memorial went viral. He later sued several media organizations for defamation over their coverage of the video.

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