On a sweltering night in June 1938, a mere boxing match riveted the eyes of people around the world. Those who had radios sat glued to their sofas listening intently, while more than 70,000 sat excitedly in Yankee Stadium awaiting the most anticipated match at that time, the rematch between Joe Louis, an African-American boxer, and Max Schmeling, considered a Nazi symbol. When the opening bell clanged, people gripped their seats tensely, straining to hear or see the progress of the match. After an action-filled hundred and twenty-four seconds, Schmeling was groveling on the floor, and a white towel, thrown by Schmeling’s trainer, was lying in the ring signaling surrender. Newspapers declared the fight as a battle between good and evil, Louis representing good and Schmeling symbolizing the evil of the Nazis. On the contrary, reality displays that Schmeling refused to follow Nazi beliefs and dispose of his Jewish manager. Later it was discovered that he had hidden two Jewish boys during the Nazi reign of hate.

I feel a special connection to Max Schmeling’s actions. On a bright and clear morning at Brea Junior High, I was faced with the decision that Max confronted. During our P.E. class, I was placed on a soccer team with a boy who was relatively small compared to many teenagers. He was used to harassment at the hands of his peers. On that Monday we were facing a team with one particularly popular boy. I had always thought of him as an amiable person, but that day altered my opinion about him.

As always, the game began with the opposing team scoring multiple goals on us. Then my disliked teammate began vying for the ball with the well-liked teenager. That was when chaos erupted, like a volcano. The popular boy placed his hands on the smaller boy’s forehead. This prevented the smaller boy from running since the strength of the perpetrator was focused on his smaller and weaker body. Most of the players just stood there and snickered at the victim’s toils at trying to escape humiliation. For a few seconds, I stood silent, watching with sorrowful eyes mourning the cruelty of mankind.

Then it dawned on me, what would be the use of speculating? My actions would halt the mistreatment of someone who was being teased as a result of his height. Time flew by as I remained ambivalent, arguing with myself. If I confronted the popular teen, I had a very high chance of not being adulated but despised, but I also remained aware of the suffering my teammate faced. What would it be like to be that person? Wouldn’t I yearn for someone to rescue me from further embarrassment? Those questions overpowered my doubt, and I chose to rescue my teammate.

What occurred afterwards surprised me greatly. The well-liked teenager stepped back and later left him alone. Like Max Schmeling, I encountered a decision that might have earned the hate of others. Schmeling was well-liked by the Nazis, seen as an
excellent model for their so-called superior Aryan race, yet he refused to follow Nazi practices and did not fire his Jewish manager Joe Jacobs. Although this itself was a courageous deed, he undertook a more valiant and dangerous deed. Being very liked, Max Schmeling knew that his actions might drastically degrade his popularity, and earn him a spot in the gallows or a concentration camp. Surprisingly, he did what was morally right and went against the crowd. Max sheltered two sons of one of his Jewish friends in his hotel evading visitors by telling the hotel staff that he was ill. Later, he helped the two boys find their way to safety.

Years after his defeat, Max Schmeling would write, “Every defeat has its good side. A victory over Joe Louis would perhaps have made me the toast of the Third Reich” (http://www.ibohof.com/ibhhfv5.htm). This would have resulted in Schmeling being tried as a war criminal. His decision to assist the two boys to safety illuminated his life since his actions further debunked the idea that Schmeling promoted the Nazi regime. Likewise my experience also brightened my life, but in a more subtle way. In times where I am a perpetrator, I can recall my response to a conflict on a bright and clear morning and the consequence of that experience. Our similar incidents reveal one paramount theme; what is popular is not always right and what is right is not always popular.