



CARNEGIE MELLON'S OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT, STUDENT AFFAIRS,
and CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM
PROUDLY PRESENT

The 2011 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Writing Awards

celebrating the creative works of Pittsburgh-area high school students

Monday January 17, 2011

McConomy Auditorium, University Center

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Writing Awards

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acknowledgments

The 2011 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Writing Awards are sponsored by the Carnegie Mellon Creative Writing Program, Student Affairs, and Office of the President. For their continued generosity, service, and support we thank President Jared L. Cohon, Anne Witchner, Dan Tyson, and Vickie Mackel. We also extend our deepest gratitude to the Pittsburgh area high school teachers who dedicated their time and energy to help students organize, revise, and submit writing for the contest. Without the unique voices of local students, this event would not be possible. Congratulations to every student who submitted work this year.

winners

nonfiction

First Place

CONNOR CHARNEY, junior, Winchester Thurston School, “A Cloudy Day in July”

NATHAN HUBEL, senior, Winchester Thurston School, “An Invisible Wall”

Runners-Up

SCOTT COHEN, junior, The Kiski School, “Celebrate Diversity”

KYLE DEVAULT, junior, The Kiski School, “Fear”

THOMAS HOLMES, junior, Winchester Thurston School, “Label”

GABE ISAACSON, junior, Winchester Thurston School, “My Way to Understanding”

CHARLES FAIN LEHMAN, senior, Winchester Thurston School, “Eating Out with Dr. King”

MAYA MUENZER, junior, Winchester Thurston School, “Opposites Attract”

Honorable Mentions

RASHAAD PHILLIPS, junior, Shady Side Academy, “A Smile of Hope”

OBI UDEZEH, freshman, The Kiski School, “What We Think of Ourselves”

JING DAISY ZHU, senior, Winchester Thurston School, “The Banana Generation”

fiction

First Place

JUHYE KIM, senior, Winchester Thurston School, “Vestige of Friendship”

poetry

First Place

ELENA JACKENDOFF, senior, Pittsburgh CAPA, “Hace un viaje en la luz de la luna”

Runner-Up

FREDDIE-MAE STEWART, junior, The Neighborhood Academy, “All Sides of Me”

Honorable Mentions

KATIE FREEMAN, freshman, Carrick High School, “All the Same”

LILY NGUYEN, freshman, Winchester Thurston High School “Beautiful”

nonfiction

First Place

CONNOR CHARNEY

junior, Winchester Thurston School,

“A Cloudy Day in July”

The warm breeze brushes against my chest as I finish my latest read, *The Long Walk* by Stephen King. The sun beats down on my shoulders as I dry from my last swim. Lifeguarding: the perfect first job. As a young white teenager in the summer before my junior year, nothing was more appealing than getting paid to go swimming and to get a tan. Being the youngest guard at sixteen, I was naïve, not yet exposed to the unforeseen consequences of my decisions towards the patrons of our pool. It was mid-July, on a cooler day when my view of the world of lifeguards began to change.

A slight drizzle began to blow across our pool. The rain was soothing and the day was cold enough that the pool lay nearly empty. We finished cleaning early and were able to relax when we were down from our perch next to the pool. Only one family was swimming today. This family came almost every day during the summer and as a result we, the guards, became friends with this family. Their kids enjoyed when we would throw them into the pool and play different games with them, including a particularly tiring one in which their youngest daughter Sidney, who was about six or seven, would steal my sunglasses and try to keep them away from me. It was relaxing days like this that made up for the busy, crowded days filled with extreme heat and the screams of particularly loud and bothersome kids.

Soon a large group of young boys and one girl came to swim; some carried themselves with the awkwardness of middle school and others filled with the energy of youth, unable to stand still. This group of kids was troublesome and rambunctious when together, but completely calm and polite when alone. This group consisted of: twin white brothers old enough to be in middle school, a short redhead the same age as the twins, and his little brother who followed them. The remaining were three black kids: one boy the same age as the twins, his little brother with silly-bands covering up all the skin on his arms and a small Mohawk, and their younger sister in fifth grade. The group entered the pool by diving in the deep end. I was finishing my novel, drying off, and catching my breath after retrieving my sunglasses from Sidney. It was soon my turn to take my post in the tall white chairs. I relieved Danielle, the assistant-head guard, from her post at the shallow chair and she walked over to the deep chair for the final stop in her rotation.

My observation of the pool was more relaxed and nonchalant because of the lack of patrons. However soon the group moved into the “baby shallow” area to my left. This section of the pool was very shallow; steps led into two feet and the rope at three feet marked the end of this area. This group was usually not allowed in that area because they had passed their deep test; however I let them go because there was no one else in the pool. Knowing that this group was prone to causing problems I kept a close watch on them, and made sure they adhered exactly to the rules that they have long been reprimanded for.

Soon the kids began to roughhouse and abuse the privilege that they were given. In the shallow end they were able to stand with their waist above the water. Then out of nowhere, the kids began to wrestle. They dunked and threw each other in the air. They would pick each other up and slam each other hard against the water. In the shallow water the chances of neck injury increase dramatically. At first I tried yelling to them, asking them to stop. They either ignored me or didn't hear me. Then I took out my sliver whistle, and created the sound that I once feared as a young swimmer. After the blaring noise, the silence was deafening. The group looked up at me with puppy dog eyes acting as if they didn't do anything wrong. I told them to stop the wrestling or else they would have to sit out for five minutes, this minimal punishment seemed excruciating for any kid. However my warning did not faze the group of young kids, and they immediately continued their wrestling. I yelled warning after warning, but still they continued. It got to the point where I said, “I will count to three if every single one of you does not stop roughhousing, then you are all done for the day.” With this punishment I hoped that the group would pressure their friends to obey the rules because they themselves did not want to be kicked out. Only the three black children listened.

Three. My final word hung in the air. I blew my whistle and yelled, “All of you! Out!” At the same time Ekaterina, the closest guard to my age, came to rotate me out of my chair. The group protested and protested but their fate was decided. They proceeded to take the longest time to get out of the pool and only increased their pace when threats of revoking their passes

rang through the air from Danielle. Ekaterina took my place in the shallow chair, and I stood next to the pool as Danielle came down from her perch in the deep end. As the group exited the pool the older black kid bumped my shoulder. “Racist,” he muttered loud enough for me alone to hear it.

I turned as he passed, and he stared me dead in the eye. Pure disdain looked back at me. The kids left but that one word rung in my ears. I tried to finish my book but I couldn’t. I just sat with my feet in the pool staring at the water. Although I knew in my head I was following what I was taught, it made me question my decision to kick out the whole group, after all the three black kids were the ones that stopped. Never in my life had I thought one word from a kid years younger than me could stand so strong in my head. I am white but I never considered myself a racist. Yet this word made me reflect and question everything I had ever done or said. I have friends of different races and I have made jokes about stereotypes around those friends. Does the fact that I’m white and I kicked out black kids make me racist? Did that one choice to kick kids out of a pool make me racist?

These questions swam in my head. As I sat with my feet in the water, I was oblivious to Sidney sneaking up on me. She plopped herself down in my lap and grabbed my sunglasses from my face. Placed them on her head and looked up at me with a big smile. My eyes were red and dry, the thoughts in my head were pushing me into an emotional state like I had not experienced. As she looked up at me, she saw that I was bothered by this situation and wrapped her hands around my neck in a warm embrace.

Somehow, Sidney made me realize that I wasn’t racist. She was innocent, unaware of what just happened. She merely saw that I was upset about something, and it didn’t matter to her what it was or when it happened; all she wanted to do was comfort me. I realize that in that moment when I looked into that young boy’s eyes, I had lost the innocence in my head regarding racism. I realized that I made the right decision. I realized that I am not racist. In my decision to kick the kids out of the pool, their race did not come into my mind; my decision was based solely on their safety.

However there was another issue presented: I had displayed prejudice towards the group. As soon as they entered the pool area my eyes were all over them. This display of weakness showed me how susceptible everyone is to prejudice. My predisposition to a group played a role in how I treated them, being more lenient with the kids I had played with and had befriended over the summer, and stricter on the “bad” group. My mind went back to all of the other times that I had just given kids warnings for the same offence that the group had committed. Because of my experiences I had developed favoritism towards the kids that made my job easier. Reflecting on this clear discrimination made me realize why the twins thought I was the meanest guard at the pool and Sidney thought I was the nicest. I allowed myself to become susceptible to discrimination. This realization caused me to break down mentally. I felt physically sick with hatred for my own actions.

Because of this experience, I realize that racism can be a powerful force in our society. But the only way that racism retains that power is if we allow it to influence our decisions. I have been blessed in my life to not be faced with the struggle of belonging to a minority. My life has taken me through accepting communities where the social norm was to accept people of different races. However nice these experiences are, they did not allow me to grow as a person. A summer job put me in an area where the implications of belonging to a different race or group are far reaching. Society will only be able to progress if we work together without discriminating because of race, religion, or any of the groups that we place others or ourselves.

I failed to acknowledge the issue of discrimination in our society because I lived a life where I was never presented with that issue. The only way I was able to acknowledge that there is an issue is to be the offender of such a digression. After this issue had occurred my decision making in the pool changed dramatically. I tried my best to treat all equally and with equal respect, but the damage was already done. To that group I was viewed as the antagonist to their summer at the pool and it would take a long time, if even possible, to repair the effects of my discrimination. My summer ended without any other major incident such as this, and everyday since I have made a conscious effort in my life to not discriminate regardless of the group that any person belongs to. I acknowledge that discrimination can take place across any group and any walk of life regardless of race, yet the irony of our world is that the only way for me to realize this transgression of moral bounds that takes place every day was to be the offender of that breach in society.

As I sat there, my feet in the water and Sidney around my neck, my mind weighed heavy with my epiphany. I looked around and realized that life had continued without me. The guards continued their daily rotation but I was stuck in limbo, not moving through my day, frozen by my thoughts. As my mind, forever changed, slowly reentered the world I got to my feet, stole my glasses back from Sidney, and pried her from my neck. I walked back to my book, opened the cover, and continued my read; I realized that my life would not progress unless I did it myself. Just like how the world will not move forward past discrimination unless we do it ourselves.

NATHAN HUBEL

senior, Winchester Thurston School

“An Invisible Wall”

A world of snow greeted me as I woke up at 6:30AM only to find out that school was canceled. It was, I thought, going to be a great day. It is not the winter wonderland, or even the closing of school I looked forward to so much as the ability to earn substantial amounts of money shoveling snow. Bundled up in several layers of winter clothing and with my oversized shovel in hand, I was ready to take on this snowed-in world. Most teenagers can make money shoveling in their neighborhoods but mine is a goldmine. Much of the population is wealthy, elderly, and, unfortunately as I would soon find out, includes some racists.

By noon I was no longer quite as self-confident. I had underestimated the amount of effort it would take to shovel over a foot of snow in reasonable amounts of time. I did not have the build useful for this type of labor, and I was tiring quickly. However, I had finished four houses by noon and amassed an impressive \$120 for the effort. Due to variables that affected the difficulty of the job from house to house, I allowed people to decide what they wanted to pay me. It was risky, but it paid off. When I finished with the fourth house and went to the owner for payment she said, “I usually only give \$25 for shoveling but since you worked so hard and you’re from around here I’ll give you \$30.” I had never met this person before, but I assumed that she had seen me running near her house sometime, which I often had done.

I headed toward the next house that was buried in snow. As I was walking, I saw a number of other people wearing heavy black jackets and carrying huge shovels in the hopes of finding work. Some looked like professionals while others were about the same age and build as me, but from a distance everyone looked virtually identical. Two of the people walking towards me looking for houses to shovel were black, and I recognized them. They played basketball at the local high school in the adjacent neighborhood that I ran through in my training for cross-country. As I was walking past them, one of them asked, “Hey! How much you making around here?” I replied, “about \$30” which was the average for the four houses I had visited. The first one looked surprised while the other one whistled loudly and asked rhetorically, “Why can’t we get that much?” “I think you know why. F-ck this place man,” the first one responded with a mixture of sarcasm and anger and turned to walk with his friend in the opposite direction. They were both stronger than I was and thus probably did a better and faster job but they obviously had gotten paid less for it. The sad thing is that I was not stunned.

Naturally, I hesitated to label those living in my neighborhood as racist but after shoveling a few more houses and making similar amounts of money, I considered the possibility further. Having been a part of a local Boy Scouts troop for a brief time, I had always known my neighborhood to be very provincial and to practice local favoritism. If I had gone up and asked the neighbors who paid the black shovelers unjustly, not to mention the strong possibility that some denied them work altogether because of the color of their skin, I have a strong suspicion that some would have responded that, “They weren’t from around here.” This does not make the actions of these neighbors any more excusable. Of course, the black shovelers were from around here, just on the other side of a major roadway, one of many physical barriers in Pittsburgh conveniently separating racial communities from each other.

I cannot distinguish whether the injustice that the black shovelers experienced was pure racism or local favoritism superimposed with a racial element, but what I can point out is that even over fifty years after Martin Luther King led the movement for social equality and school integration, there is still a stunning lack of geographic integration between races. The reasons for this are multifaceted as many people justifiably prefer living in the neighborhood they grew up in, feel most comfortable in, or can economically afford, but there are racist elements that seek to prevent the racial mixing of neighborhoods and forces that facilitate poverty in neighborhoods populated by underrepresented minorities. The sheer lack of diversity in many neighborhoods cannot be overlooked as a heavy contributor and indicator of the continued existence of racial prejudice.

The racial seclusion and division in many neighborhoods became all the more clear to me when my family had to go through the taxing process of moving to a new house. In one particular neighborhood that we researched online there was a large crumbling wall covered in ivy. Two houses on one side of the wall cost around \$200,000, but three houses of approximately equal size a few blocks away on the other side of the wall cost around \$90,000. That side of the wall was a largely black neighborhood. The wall, now in complete disrepair, was a holdover from the pre-civil rights days when white communities built physical structures in order to separate communities. Any defender of this seemingly inexplicable price difference

might claim that the other house is “in a worse school district” or “in a less safe neighborhood” using numbers to justify lower property value. However, these claims are only true because people have created the conditions for it to be true. School districts tend to be based on these physical barriers and money is allocated unequally. Gangs and violence are directly correlated with unemployment and underemployment, which is also correlated with the quality of the school district one is born into. Martin Luther King once said that he hopes to “look to a day when people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” However, social injustices held over from the pre-civil rights days are still surreptitiously preventing the complete demise of racial injustice. Were the black shovelers paid less because people in my neighborhood assumed they were used to making less money than I was? What if I had accompanied the black shovelers that one snowy day? Would we have made the same amount of money per house that I did alone? Would it be assumed that I was not from the neighborhood, or would it be assumed that the black shovelers were from the neighborhood? Either way, while physical walls separating white and black neighborhoods have long since crumbled, invisible psychological barriers still remain.

Runners-Up

SCOTT COHEN

junior, The Kiski School

“Celebrate Diversity”

When I was twelve, my family and I went on a cruise to Alaska. I thoroughly enjoyed the amenities the ship provided and eagerly wondered around the boat engaging myself in exciting activities such as rock climbing, playing basketball, playing miniature golf, and enjoying the other numerous facilities the ship had.

One morning, my father announced to my family that we would be attending Friday night Shabbat services. Once he was finished, I immediately expressed my dissent to attend. I was firm in my belief that since we didn't routinely attend services at home, I shouldn't have to sacrifice my recreational time to go to services on a cruise ship while on vacation. My father rejected my objections and stated that I had no choice but to attend.

I eventually dropped my objections and attended services to appease my father. As we walked into the room, I saw a group of people, who at surface level did not appear to be any different than the rest of the passengers, but on a more personal level we all share a common bond of having the same religious beliefs. There were thousands of passengers on the cruise ship, and it was interesting to see some people who shared the same history and beliefs. It became clear that people may have come to this service to meet other Jewish people, not necessarily to pray.

My expectations of the service were very different from what it actually was. People were not overly dressed up and weren't acting formal as you would in synagogue. It was just a group of people who seemed welcoming and friendly. The service was held in a conference room on a middle floor of the ship with basic furnishings and the other necessary furniture needed to make everyone comfortable. The ambiance of the room was calm, yet people seemed excited about the present opportunity. The service was relatively short and the standard prayers were recited. Around thirty people attended the service, and afterward people socialized with the other passengers.

Religion is taken very seriously by many people, and I was expecting the atmosphere at the service to be formal and uncomfortable. However, everyone was in a personable mood and wanted to meet new people. This relaxed atmosphere made everyone feel comfortable and welcomed, which allowed the other people and I to feel at ease, allowing us to be active in the service and in conversation.

Under a century ago, Jewish people were being executed in Europe for their religious affiliation. Every day I feel fortunate to live in a nation that permits me to practice the religion of my choice without discrimination or persecution. Martin Luther King Jr. was a monumental figure in promoting tolerance among all kinds of people. His courage and bravery allowed members of different races and ethnic backgrounds to openly celebrate diversity and to be proud to display their heritage.

Abraham Joshua Heschel was Jewish civil right activist who fought for equality in the United States during the 1960's. In 1965, a walk from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery, Alabama, occurred as a protest against antisemitism in the South. Martin Luther King Jr. invited Heschel to join him in the front row to take a stand against the infringement of civil rights for black Americans. The collaboration of these two vastly different men evinces that although people can be different, they can still coexist and share common values, and this harmony benefits all of society. These men show that we need to accept others for who they are, and to embrace diversity as a positive aspect of humanity.

The service on the cruise ship was an opportunity for me to experience people with the same beliefs but different backgrounds, just like the connection between King and Heschel. When I entered the room, I was just hoping that it would be a quick service so that I could continue my fun. I didn't realize the unique experience that was present, which was being able to interact with people who were very similar to me, but came from vastly different cultures.

Diversity is a crucial part of the United States and helps fortify our country as a strong and united nation. The coexistence of myriad different people allows our great nation to function in harmony, and the respect between people of different back-

grounds permits peace and harmony to be present. Celebrating diversity is very important because people always need to acknowledge and honor their heritage.

Although at the time I was unsure of the purpose of attending Shabbat services on a cruise ship, I realize that the setting was a trivial detail to the importance of experiencing a unique opportunity to meet other Jewish people from all over the world. Although we came from different backgrounds, we were unified by the prayers sung in Hebrew. This service that I attended is a mere microcosm of an entire nation of people coexisting with those who are different, and allowing them to practice the religion of their choice without discrimination. This freedom to embrace diversity without persecution allows us to take advantage of our civil rights and to celebrate our heritage, which Martin Luther King Jr. diligently fought for.

KYLE DEVAULT
junior, The Kiski School

“Fear”

There was a black bikers group holding events all week long at the fairgrounds very close to my house. The bikers had been in the area for a couple days already and the road I lived on was the best route between the events and the hotels and, therefore, was frequently traveled. It was summertime around noon, I was fourteen years old, and I was riding on my dirt bike down the hill in front of my house towards the road, which I commonly do. I had been focused on riding and had not been paying much attention to my surroundings but it did not take long for me to notice. I looked up and was instantly stunned when I noticed a man, sitting in front of his house on the other side of the road, wearing a KKK mask. I did not react immediately because I could not believe my eyes. The mask is frightening even if one does not know the history behind it; it was even worse because I knew what it stood for. However, after a couple seconds, I turned around, raced back up the hill, and stopped riding. I ran into my house and told my parents who at first did not believe me and thought I just saw it wrong. Nevertheless, when they looked they saw what I did and reacted likewise. I do not know why he was there; he could be part of the KKK but more likely he was just upset with all the motorcycles passing his house. However, this made no difference in my mind and either way it was a scary sight.

I have grown up in a primarily white, diversity-lacking area and have witnessed racism before; however, this one incident shocked and made me think more than any other before. Any racist happenings which I had seen had never stuck with me. However, one event left me thinking about the difficulties which blacks had to face in the United States more than any other. I began to realize how hard it must be to deal with discrimination. Afterwards, I started appreciating people like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and people who fought other racial problems, like Mohandas Gandhi even more than I previously had. Without their works, society could still lack racial equality, religious equality, and any other equality which exists today.

On the outside it seems like this incident should be irrelevant to me (because I am white) but it moved me in a very large way. Not only did I feel upset because I have black friends but the image evoked fear in me even though it was some callous man whom I have (unfortunately) known for most of my life. If this scared me I cannot even start to imagine what it felt like for blacks who had to experience encounters with the KKK throughout history. These people would have had to face groups of men dressed like this who would take any opportunity to harm them. Beforehand I could assume it would be a very frightening sight, yet afterwards, I realized just how terrifying it would be for them if it had such an affect on me.

Through this event I can see the motives for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on a more personal level. He showed great pride and bravery in fighting for his cause when others were not as brave. Now I realize that I can not even come close to understanding the obstacles and barriers which King had to fight. However, at the same time, I have a greater understanding of his situation after feeling the terror which a cruel man in a KKK mask can evoke. I believe anyone who has the bravery to fight this image and the people behind it is a true hero. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is definitely the epitome of this hero and what he has done has created many kinds of equality in the United States.

THOMAS HOLMES

junior, Winchester Thurston School

“Label”

I spent a good part of my life living under a label. In kindergarten I was diagnosed with dysgraphia, a fine motor issue, as well as bilateral coordination issues, which for a kindergartener basically means that I couldn't cut, paste, or color in the lines. Aside from that, a more long-term, non-crayola-based effect is that I will always have trouble writing. A computer is my equalizer; it is all I really need. Due to my disability, I spent most of my elementary school years in the special education room--I couldn't color in the lines and had terrible handwriting. When I say most of my time I mean almost all of it--not just anytime there was writing or spelling or something involving the use of pencil and paper, but also for math, science, social studies, gym, and for a brief period of time in first and second grade, lunch. The latter two of that list bugged me. Sure, I'll be the first to admit I'm a klutz and I'm not the greatest athlete. However, I've always played sports; I learned to skate at three, but the school's policy about students with mild but identifiable issues was "Your kind can't do that. We'll have a special activity for you guys." For lunch I was told, "Kids like you are very special and have to have a very special lunch period so we can help you." At the time I wondered how they thought I was alive since apparently I didn't even know how to eat.

The phrases and terms used by teachers and aides to help them describe anyone who was different: "Your kind," "special kids like you," "your group," and my personal favorite, "your friends," gnawed at me. These all came across as strange because I never felt I was a part of any group, as they called the other kids in the resource room. But there wasn't another me. There wasn't even another kid with the same diagnoses as me. "My kind" consisted of the boy who couldn't talk, that girl in the wheelchair, the hyper-kid who couldn't sit still and shouted every couple minutes, and the kid who always looked asleep, who I was told was slow. These were supposed to be my breed. The term "my friends" never made sense to me as I had barely spoken to any of them. I had a group of friends who liked me for who I was, though I wasn't supposed to hang out with them because I had "my own group of 'friends' that was just like me," an aide half sneered at me once.

I was viewed as *something* stupid. To my classmates and teachers, I was something different--not the "different" as in those kids who also got pulled out of class because they were the smart ones who were allowed read those *Cam Janson* novels in first grade while I was struggling to keep a false sense of interest in books with titles like *See Spot Run* after having them read to me for the hundredth time. There was a rule at the school's library that only certain students could get certain books. The smart ones, those who were "gifted," could get those precious novels with only one or two pictures in them. "My kind" received the gift of picture books that had been so beautifully illustrated with the finest nondescript pictures in which all the characters looked like the victims of a Soviet-era experiment and in the most colorful language stated such words of wisdom, as "The dog is fun." I kept asking the librarians and my teachers for other books. At one point I grabbed a *Harry Potter* book I was reading it at home. The reaction from my teachers was straight out of the manual for SWAT negotiators. It was as if I had taken hostages, was armed, and demanded a helicopter to transport me to a small island country in exchange for their release. In those "everyone's-happy-everyone's-calm" voices I was told, "Drop the book that's out of your range you can't read that yet that's not for kids like you let help pick out a nice book you can read."

During this elementary school experience, I was lucky in a lot of ways. I had the support of my parents and a fantastic special education teacher who believed in me as an individual. It is nearly impossible for one to suffer through the truly Sisyphian task of solitarily arguing for a sense of equality. Any activist will almost instantly reach for that hackneyed cliché of "strength in numbers" and it's true. I had people on my side. This saved me it gave me the strength to persevere. They worked as advocates on my behalf and, more importantly, showed me my own worth.

We as humans fear the unknown; we also do not want appear foolish. What ensues is a never-ending sense of fear based on the fact that we tend not to ask simple questions. I do not think that the teachers, aides, and other kids, deep down, were all vicious hating people waiting with bated breath to strike at the sound of a wheelchair creaking in the halls or a short-bus coming to a stop. I think that the case was simply they did not know any better. The best example in my experience was my principal at the time, who I did not get off all too well with. One time in a meeting with my parents about assisted technology (a computer) he made reference to my "autism." Aside from sending my mother through the roof (it happened quite a bit of the time), this event really did signify something. Here was a man who was an example for the entire school, more than that he ran it and he did not have the correct disability down (not even close). He had the access to information, experts, and me, but he chose to ignore it all and that culture trickled down. You can't blame somebody who truly doesn't know and is only

looking up to his or her moral authority figures, but someone who chooses to ignorant you can. To quote Dr. King, “Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.”

Flashing forward to seventh grade I finally was accepted into my school’s gifted program, the very same kids who got to read the good books in elementary school. What followed was comical in a melancholy way. Many of the kids I knew, the same kids who hadn’t given me a break about being the dumb one or the retard in the class, started coming up to me asking, “Holmes you’re smart?” Not in a mocking way, but in that soft surprised voice someone gets when they discover something shocking but in a good way—apparently me. The teachers did the same. Both groups started to warm up to the idea of me as an equal. Once I was in their comfort zone of “normalcy” I was able to explain my disability to teachers and students, something I had been trying to do for the previous eight years of my life to no avail. I was finally able to tell people the clear facts. Of course, I said this information in the wonderfully terse and crude speak of an eighth-grader, casually explaining, “My handwriting sucks so I use a computer,” but the message was still clear and it was understood.

I was different. I am different. Everyone is. However I’m still human. Humanity is the single most important thing anyone can have and yet it is the easiest to lose. Rights and laws are all good and fine. In fact they’re wonderful. But humanity, the ability to be viewed as an equal, is something more valuable. When I was labeled, I was some strange lesser being. What I said didn’t matter because I wasn’t the same: I was *something* less. This changed that seventh grade year when I became an equal to those kids and teachers (well maybe not completely equal). It meant I was human like them. This struggle for equality, understanding, and the ability to be to openly speak about my disability is my struggle. Like Dr. King before me I was taken for something unequal and different, regardless of my own merit.

Writing this essay was a challenge. Writing something my peers would read, and ultimately in some way judge, gave me a slight sense of fear, a sinking feeling that by writing this essay about my disability once again I would be judged and taken as something other than myself. I would be labeled again. However I feel that it is in my best interest to write about my disability and to quote John Milton, “Sally forth and face the adversary.” That is, face the stigma attached to disabilities. Dr. King did this. He spoke directly about the issues that faced African-Americans and he showed his adversaries and opponents that they were not adversaries, that they were not opponents but one in the same: people.

GABE ISAACSON

junior, Winchester Thurston School

“My Way to Understanding”

In honor of his efforts to end racial segregation in the South by using nonviolent tactics, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was awarded the Noble Peace Prize in 1964. While accepting the illustrious award, King said, “The Bible tells the thrilling story of how Moses stood in Pharaoh’s court centuries ago and cried, ‘Let my people go.’” Much as Moses stood for the rights of his people, so did Martin Luther King, Jr. so many centuries later. I am fully aware that Dr. King’s actions were the impetus behind ultimate legislation to create equality for all in our country. Transcending simple understanding of his obvious political efforts, my appreciation for Dr. King stems from a correlation between King, Moses, and my Jewish heritage.

I am Jewish, but I do not, by any means, consider myself a substantially religious person. However, almost four years ago now, I became a Bar Mitzvah. Within the Jewish faith, becoming a Bar Mitzvah is the event at which a child becomes an adult. To do this, the young person must read a section from the *Torah*. My portion was a piece of the story of Moses. I studied, analyzed, and ultimately read this portion, covering the exceptional moment when God appears in front of Moses at the burning bush and commissions Moses to lead the Jews away from Pharaoh and into the Promised Land. To many young people, this nerve-racking, symbolic, and monumental Bar Mitzvah experience is an overwhelming and unappealing requirement. For me, however, this ceremony of initiation to manhood brought deeper thoughts of self-understanding to the forefront.

My Bar Mitzvah, being exactly on my thirteenth birthday on January 13, 2007, was on the Saturday before Martin Luther King Day. For my *D’Var Torah*, the special speech that a Bar Mitzvah boy gives to sum up his new-found understanding of Judaism and his assigned portion, I wrote about the impeccable timing of this piece of the Torah being read on that specific weekend. From the moment I read the English translation, I began to see the uncanny similarities between these two distinguished leaders, each leading their respective groups from oppression to autonomy. Moses was a simple man with a speech impediment. Even Moses himself didn’t believe he was the most apt person to lead the Jewish people from the oppression of Pharaoh. Yet, somehow, he led the Jews through the desert and out of Egypt. Martin Luther King Jr. was a normal man who, like Moses, overcame adversity and utilized his relationship with God, albeit different than Moses’, to help liberate the African American people from the persecution, most prevalent in the South but perceptible everywhere. The comparison between these two men may not mean much to some people; many people can understand the importance of these individuals without identifying their similar traits. Conversely, the relation I found between these two celebrated leaders is pivotal in order for me to understand the history of both men’s accomplishments.

The work of Martin Luther King Jr. has been by no means lost upon me. I am aware of his efforts, his works, and his successes. I am aware that without his hard work we cannot be certain that the Civil Rights movement would have resulted with equal opportunities in education, housing, and employment for African Americans. I am aware that he is a man who lived, and ultimately died, for his cause. The great awareness I have for Dr. King, nevertheless, has limits. I have awareness, but do I have an appreciation? Awareness is peripheral. I can be aware of simple facts and ideas. To have appreciation requires a deeper understanding, personal feelings toward a topic. I clearly don’t fit the mold of the person who directly benefited from the honorable actions of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. How am I, a privileged, young, Jewish, white man from Pittsburgh, supposed to fully understand the breadth of Dr. King’s innumerable efforts on behalf of the African American people? I am aware, but how do I gain appreciation? It has taken me thirteen years of studying Dr. King to come up with the answer to this question. The answer is Moses.

The thoughts from my Bar Mitzvah reflected the thirteen-year-old me. He was a different person. I am sixteen now, and I have developed new thoughts. Every year around this time, I am confronted with the concept of Martin Luther King Jr. We are always studying him and I always wonder. I wonder how I can break down the “door,” the metaphorical barrier between me and full, unabated understanding of Dr. King. My moment of understanding came at a surprising time. I was pondering why I didn’t fully feel the Civil Rights movement when I realized: my dearth of understanding could lead to abundant understanding. Earlier this year, I read King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” In this powerful letter, King makes a multitude of religious references, including some to Judaism. King states, “We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was ‘legal’ and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was ‘illegal.’ It was ‘illegal’ to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler’s Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country’s antireligious laws.” King’s complete pledge to assist any oppressed group made is what resonated with me. King helped African Americans. But if there were Jews being oppressed

in the South, King would have helped. He would have had his same dream in Washington D.C. for my grandparents instead. It is this: this realization. Moses would have done what King did, and King would have done what Moses did. Moses would have fought the oppression from the Southern bigots just as King would have fought back and demanded freedom from the tyrannical rule of Pharaoh in Egypt. And there it is. While considering King's letters from jail, my religious heritage, and the moment during which I became a man three years ago, I discovered that Jews, Africans Americans, and all oppressed groups alike would have been saved by either Dr. King or Moses. These two men, standing for the same ideals and working for the same goals, come together to create one answer. They are the one explanation for *my* understanding.

My social reality isn't one that yields any fascinating racial stories or experiences. Rather my social reality yields a story of discovery. I can state with relative certainty that many of my peers can say they come from a similar situation. How can we, that is those of us outside of the group who directly benefited from King's works, gain the appreciation for these topics that others can gain so easily? I believe the answer is simple: through association. I will never be an African American. I will never experience the difference between living in the bigoted South and living in the free America that exists today. However, I will always be Jewish. I will always understand the difference between living as an Egyptian slave and living as a free Jew anywhere in the world. My point is simple and my purpose is clear; I have found *my way* to learn about Dr. King. *My way* is different from anyone else's way. Understanding and appreciation of any given topic is an individual accomplishment achieved through an infinite number of possible approaches. My story is not simply one of race or religion. My story is one of discovery and understanding. My way and my story are distinctly mine and any other person would have their own. I believe that all individuals must find *their way* to learn, their personal appreciate of King.

My discovery of learning the works of Dr. King has taught me more than just the works of the heralded Civil Rights leader; my discovery has taught me that all people stand to learn and appreciate historic events through individual eyes. My eyes have been opened; I now understand Dr. King by looking and seeing what is most evident to me.

Teaching is extremely general. Learning, however, is one of the most individual processes we all undergo. We are taught what is deemed to be the most important. I know that I could not and did not learn to appreciate the importance of Dr. King as he was taught to me the first time. It didn't happen the second time. Or the third. It didn't happen through anyone teaching me; it happened through my learning and self-understanding. It is not easy for an individual like me to learn the extent of Dr. King's actions by being taught about marches, rallies, and documents. Real appreciation is gained through considering the principles and overriding ideals of King. Dr. King was a religious man who saw injustice and fought it. Dr. King once said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Though the injustice of the African Americans may be distant from my life, there is certainly an injustice that I can relate to.

The night before Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, he gave a speech entitled "I've Been to the Mountaintop." In this speech, he spoke about being asked about which moments in history he would have wanted to attend. The first moment he mentioned is one of great significance: "I would take my mental flight by Egypt and I would watch God's children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt through, or rather across the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the promised land." King appreciated and realized the significance of Moses' leadership, and, by being a Jew, I can appreciate Martin Luther King Jr. King's understanding of our people allows for Jews, like myself, to draw this connection. King was the Moses of modern day. I implore all people, teachers and students alike, attempting to study and understand Dr. King to consider the idea of personal relevance. There is no singular way to understand Dr. King's works; there is *your way*. Your way is as distinct as your fingerprint. We all have our own eyes, our own experiences, our own heritages, and our own qualities that separate us as individuals. Considering these qualities that make us the unique and distinct individuals that we are, we can all learn and appreciate the works of Dr. King as deeply and thoroughly as is appropriate.

CHARLES FAIN LEHMAN

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“Eating Out with Dr. King”

At any given time there are roughly nine million people residing in New York City, and at any given time half of them are pressed up against me on the subway. The New York City Subway system is the great equalizer – people take the subway regardless of race, creed, religion, or socio-economic status. A white businessman, with pinstriped suit and tie askew from the dash for the 9:30, may very well find himself next to an old Latina woman, her day’s shopping already completed, or a young black man having hopped the train from Brooklyn to get in to work on time. The subway is a tool for the community, there at the command of anyone who can pay the two dollars in MTA fare. There are nine million people residing in New York City, nine million faces and bodies of every single color, and they all, for the most part, ride the subway together.

New York is a city of many things, not just of subway riders. It is a frightening and yet exhilarating place – a place where buildings loom over you and, by a trick of the light (or so you hope), appear to be about to come toppling down. Where on every street corner vendors hawk hot-dogs and halal side-by-side. Where you can literally be swallowed up by the blocks-long swathes of people. A place so alive and energetic that it is very easy to become lost among it all. And yet, beyond anything else, two things are true about New York. The first is that it is a city of diversity – this has already been more than evidenced by the egalitarianism of the subway. The second is that it is a city of food. New York is a Mecca of culinary experience, a metropolis of the succulent and savory and exceptional. This seems inherently contradictory – after all people as exceedingly diverse as the population of New York City proper ought not to have a uniform desire for food experience. One might imagine that people would divide by ethnicity or racial background. And yet they do not. In New York, it is entirely possible to see Italian, Armenian and Korean cuisine all squished together, like one exquisitely-crafted sandwich of foreign flavor. New York is a capital of comestibles because it takes advantage of a

universal truth about its occupants, about all people – regardless of race, religion, ethnicity or creed, we all appreciate food. If all the people of New York were exceedingly different, they would divide themselves culinarily. Yet they do not, and instead they experience food across racial boundaries. Martin Luther King understood that, in the end, all men are equal, undivided by race or other surface-level states. And this is more than apparent from the diversity of food enjoyed throughout New York, for although all food may be different, the love of food is universal, and makes it more than apparent that we are not as different as we first appear.

To extensively paraphrase Jesus, “man does not live on bread piled high with pastrami alone, but it would be very nice if he could.” Katz’s Delicatessen, nestled between a cheap pizza place and a tight, dusty alley, is staffed by the sort of people who try very hard to prove this maxim wrong. Katz’s is a classic Jewish deli, with all of the meaty treats associated – corned beef, salami (“send a salami to your boy in the army” reminds a sign in the back), potato pancakes, a whole cavalcade of delicatessen delights. But at Katz’s, pastrami is the true attraction, the ringmaster of the New-York deli circus. And it is why I first came to Katz’s, to experience what is often suggested to be the best pastrami in New York. Entering, one is struck by the dining-hall style of eating, with long rows of wooden tables filled with boisterous customers. To the right, orders are accepted at a lengthy white counter, while from somewhere unseen the wafting scent of potatoes electrifies the air. One might expect Katz’s to have a mostly white, upper-east-side clientele, but it does not. It attracts all sorts – when we sit down, we discover that the family of three to our left is, in fact, a group of British tourists here on holiday. Katz’s customers are almost as varied as the dishes it serves, because they’ve all been drawn to this deli not for any particular social cause, but for the pure and simple love of food. Around me, the burbling chatter of patrons intermingles with the clash and clang of the kitchen and the smells and sights of the pastrami-stacked sandwich before me. Sated on my senses, I dig in.

Katz’s may attract all sorts, that’s true. But the true ubiquitous appeal of New York’s food is not apparent from Katz’s alone; after all, it is an international icon. Discovering how food bridges gaps requires exploring not just the well known but the unknown as well. For example, I remember fondly a little Dim Sum place somewhere in the depths of Chinatown. Of course, New York has many Chinatowns (somewhere along the lines of seven), but Manhattan’s Chinatown is unique – it holds the single largest concentration of Chinese people in the western hemisphere. Walking down the street, this is more than apparent. The crush of people sweeps you along in a wave of Mandarin, and you can barely stop to glance into the shops where, if you could only step to the side, you might see the diverse foodstuffs which Chinatown purveys. These range from the fairly mundane – fruits of all sorts, a wide variety of vegetables – to the downright odd – exotic (and sometimes shady) meats hanging from string or under glass. Chinatown is a culinary adventure, and not for the faint of heart.

And, hidden just around a bend, past the window shopping for oriental exotica, there is a tiny, hole-in-the-wall restaurant just a few steps above street level. Dim Sum, a Cantonese tradition, involves the serving of lots of little dishes, generally from a cart. Finding good Dim Sum is an interesting challenge, but this particular nook, I have found, renders it exceptionally. Pushing open the door, a bell tinkles, and the tiny shop unfolds before me. It is brightly lit, with small, sparsely-populated tables of some dark faux wood. Against the wall, several large fish tanks rest, populated with bouncing crustaceans, their claws wrapped by rubber bands. In here, there are only a few faces – after lunch, the crowd will have mostly thinned out. But, several customers remain – in the corner, a couple murmurs in Mandarin, while several tables over, a Caucasian college kid eats hunched over his school books. A cart, the traditional means of Dim Sum delivery, will sometimes drift by, delivering the tiny treasures within – small dishes, yet tasty. It is an entirely comfortable atmosphere, maybe in some ways abnormal from some dining experiences. I was, after all, undeniably a white person, and this was undeniably an Asian-oriented restaurant. Yet there is no sense of an us or a them, of a you and I. There is no feeling that these silly white people will have to be looked after, will need forks instead of chop sticks. There is an unspoken bond here, one which hovers unseen in the air like the steam rising from a tray of dumplings.

It would be a heinous crime, nay, an offense against humanity, to forget dessert after a good meal. I think that all of us, Dr. King included, might agree that there are times for the savory, and the salty, and the sophisticated, but sometimes what's really needed is something delectably sweet and delicious. Ferrara, located somewhere in the heart of Little Italy, is the ideal place to fulfill such a craving. It is a landmark, with the brightly-colored ten-foot sign overhanging the front, beckoning strangers to enter and enjoy. Out front, a gelato cart perches against the side wall, just in case those entering need a little dessert while they're waiting in line for dessert. Inside, an old-style facade awaits, with bar stools and little booths. Under glass, like some exotic treasure, are an array of decadent desserts – cookies, biscotti, pastries, and of course cannoli. Ferrara is all that should be true about a dessert place, somewhere dedicated to the art of delicious.

Ferrara is a remarkable story not only because of its status as a haven of desserts, but also because of its history. Founded in 1892, and began life in Little Italy as a taste of home for the immigrants arriving to the new world in search of employment. It must have been a great comfort, in so foreign a place, to have something as pleasantly familiar as cannoli, and so lovingly prepared. Yet, it is apparent that the appeal of Ferrara expanded to a more universal acclaim. One can only imagine word leaking slowly from the mouths of those working on the factory floor to their fellows, the first few keen adventurers into Little Italy from the outside world, the growth. Ferrara was a success story not because it just sold to Italians. It's been around for a hundred years not just because it was popular among local members of the community. Ferrara has been such an achievement, and remains popular today because it served good food in a place that wasn't afraid of food, no matter who served it. This is what draws together places like Katz's and Ferrara and even smaller places like the Dim Sum I enjoyed in Chinatown. They do not have appeal just to those who eat that particular style of food; they have appeal to those who eat all styles of food, regardless of who they appear to be on the outside.

At a rally in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. declared that, "Atlanta needs another Jefferson to scratch across the pages of history words lifted to cosmic proportions: 'We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal.'" All men are created equal. These five words, their meanings fairly apparent, have yet been the source of much contention throughout history. Dr. King was a champion of these words, a man who understood that, underneath everything, underneath skin and hair and family and religion, we are all created equal. And, is not the shared experience which we have with food yet more evidence of our equality? That I should love pastrami and my fellow man should love pastrami, does this not help to make us equals? That I and my fellow should step over the boundary of customer and waiter and share a deeper expression of culinary affection, does this not help to make us equals? That I and my fellow should wish to enjoy a food, not because it is of our culture or our people or our religion, but simply because we enjoy it, does that not make us equals? Man is, at the bottom of things, crafted in the same way. We are each endowed with the same nose to sniff with, to inhale deeply from. We are each endowed with the same teeth to crunch and crackle. We are each endowed with the same tongue to taste the same rich flavors. And we are each endowed with, ultimately, the same appreciation of what brings us together, and that includes food. Not all food may be universal – I may not like brussel sprouts and you may not like celery – but the love of food is universal.

I regret to share another anecdote, and would not do so if it were not so pertinent. Yet, I am reminded of yet another meal, perhaps a year ago. This one was a smaller affair – dinner at home with family. My sister, my mother, my grandfather, and myself were all gathered around the table. My father would be joining us shortly – he was returning from a lengthy business trip to China. We had ordered from a local restaurant, and as my father came in the door, my grandfather beckoned him in. "Sit down, Philip, we're having Chinese food!" My father responded, a glint in his eye, "No, no you're not."

This moment has stuck with me, I think, not merely for its amusement factor, but also because of the not-so-apparent-poignancy behind the thought. Because, getting right down to it, American Chinese food isn't Chinese food – it's "American" Chinese food. There is certainly far less General Tso's Chicken in China than in America. But, the idea of "American" Chinese food doesn't need real Chinese food, because it isn't really Chinese food – it's American food. It's food which has an identity that doesn't just fit into one ethnicity or cultural group. White people eat it. African Americans eat it. Christians, Jews, and Muslims eat it. Indeed, even Chinese people eat it. It is a shared, common experience among Americans. Maybe this is a long way to go to say that we are all created equal because we all eat Chinese food. Yet it is utterly true. We are, black or white, old or young, gay or straight, religious or not, all a party to the idea of the universal love of food. How can we all not be equal if such a powerful social thing as food is, in many ways, universal to all of us?

I am not aware as to whether or not Dr. King was a good cook. But, I have no doubt that he, like the rest of us, could have been persuaded to enjoy a sandwich at Katz's or a Dim Sum dumpling or a cannoli at Ferrara. Dr. King reminds us that "all men are created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights." Is not a love of food one of them?

MAYA MUENZER

junior, Winchester Thurston School,

“Opposites Attract”

It’s hard to explain to people who assume I’m from Hawaii or Mexico where I come from. My paternal grandfather was a Jewish Austrian who escaped from the Nazis in WWII. My maternal grandmother, however, is a Muslim Bengali who married a Pakistani. There was tension in my family when my parents married: Judaism and Islam don’t mix well.

I call the grandfather on my mother’s side Ajji, an affectionate title meaning “honored father.” After marrying my grandmother, he adopted my mother and her sister and raised them as his own daughters. Shaheen, my mother, and her younger sister Saku never knew their real father. Ajji was the only father they could turn to; he was the only father they could look up to. As an academic, he pushed them to do well in their studies; as a father, he loved them and only wanted the best for them.

In graduate school, my mother met Clark Muenzer, the man who would become my father. After months of vigorous political debates and arguments and countless dates-gone-awry, my parents were engaged. They didn’t think about the repercussions of their decision. My mother sent a letter to Pakistan, where my grandparents were visiting at the time from their new home of San Diego, where they had settled after moving to the States. While Ajji is a strong-willed, strong-hearted man, when he received the letter informing him of his daughter’s plans to marry a Jewish man, his strong character was challenged by his orthodox and prejudiced parents, whose opinions he respected. He ignored the letter. My mother didn’t get a reply for her seemingly joyful news. For months, Ajji blocked his daughter out of his life. When the marriage came around, his back was still turned to the traitor of his family: the daughter who was marrying an outsider.

Ajji tried and failed to prevent my grandmother from going to her own daughter’s wedding. While my father’s parents were wary of the marriage, they still let my parents make their own decision to go through with the wedding. My father’s side of the family dominated the ceremony, but my Nannu, my loving Nannu, was there for her daughter, despite obvious disapproval from her husband. After the wedding, things didn’t change. The years drew on, and my mother and Nannu found secret ways of communicating with each other. While Ajji would rip up and hide the letters from my mother addressed to Nannu when he found them in the mail, letters addressed to Nannu’s neighbor remained secret from him. Quick, spontaneous phone calls from random phone booths occasionally surprised my mother from Nannu. Nannu even managed to squeeze in a short, three-hour visit with my parents, when she and Kamron (her sixteen-year-old son with Ajji) were stopped in New York City between flights.

The isolation of my mother lasted for nine years. For nine years, Ajji forbade my Nannu from contacting her. For nine years, my Nannu had to resort to scarce letters sent to a neighbor’s house and rare phone calls from phone booths to hear from her daughter. For nine years my grandfather didn’t know anything about my father except his religion. For nine years my mother was dead to her father.

After nine long years of silence, Ajji called my parents. They reconciled. It took several years on top of that for my mother to forgive him. I didn’t understand why she forgave him for ripping her out of his life, and she explained to me two things: he was the only father she had, and her forgiveness made Nannu happy. While both my parents can look at him and see a good man, Ajji still hasn’t forgiven himself.

On the infrequent occasions when we see my grandparents, Ajji makes sure to spend as much time as possible with my father. They have lengthy discussions debating poetry and philosophy together; they read over Ajji’s manuscripts together; they laugh about jokes together. My father and grandfather have as much in common as they have at odds. These mutual points brought together my father and grandfather. The bond formed between the two scholarly men seamlessly covered the ditch that was once their relationship; this bond cooled the friction between Islam and Judaism in my family.

My brother and I grew up with small bits of each religion integrated into our lives; there was just enough of both so we knew they were parts of our heritage. Every Eid I would get a check in the mail from my Nannu to buy a pretty, new dress to wear on the Muslim holiday. Every night of Hanukkah my brother, mother, father, and I lit the candles, sang the prayer, and got presents. The rest of the year, both religions faded into the background of my life. Both my father’s family and my mother’s family live hours away from Pittsburgh, so we don’t visit often, and I didn’t get much of an opportunity to witness the role of religion in my grandparents’ lives. I didn’t know about the tension that happened long before I was born.

When I got to the fourth grade, however, I started to notice some of the differences between the two sides of my family. More specifically, I started to notice the different expectations for how I was to act and dress around my father’s family.

versus that of my mother. When I went to San Diego to visit my Nannu and Ajji, I was suddenly only allowed to pack skirts and shorts that fell below my knees, and I was not allowed to bring tank-tops with me; I was warned against singing the catchy melodies of Hanukkah songs I had learned in chorus at school for the holiday performance; and I was forced to wear the traditional garb of Bangladeshi girls, a *shalwar kamez*, when we went out to dinner. I was told that was the appropriate way for me to behave and present myself around my grandparents so as not to upset them. As I grew older, I realized small sacrifices regarding dress and attitude were only reflections of my respect for my Nannu and Ajji, and therefore I complied without resistance. As my grandparents grew accustomed to American ways, they accepted the behaviors and dress that are more natural to me, and they accepted the fact that I am not only part of their family, but I am also part of my father's family.

Thirty-five years after my parents' marriage, the tension is undetectable. The different sides of my family are more similar than meets the eye. While my mother's side has darker toned skin and my father's side has lighter toned skin, they both value education, religion, and love. The familial love I feel visiting my Nannu and Ajji is the same love I felt visiting my Nanny on my father's side. The difference between wearing a *shalwar kamez* and wearing a tank-top and shorts is negligible compared to the connection and love within my family.

Honorable Mentions

RASHAAD PHILLIPS

junior, Shady Side Academy

A Smile of Hope

This past summer I went to Ghana, West Africa with a student travel group, Global Leadership Adventures. I was going on this trip to find myself. Most of the people at my school are either Caucasian or 1st or 2nd generation Americans from Europe or Asia: they all know exactly where their ancestors come from, and they know intricate details about their ancestors' culture. Most of the people at my school could also afford to return to where their ancestors came from. My ancestors were African slaves. When they were slaves, their last names were taken away. They were forced to move from plantation to plantation; many were separated from their families. My ancestor information has been erased; I have been told by my family members that my ancestors are from West Africa, but in reality I do not know that for sure.

When I was selected by my school for a Parkin fellowship, I knew that I wanted to go to Ghana, because I saw an ad of children from Ghana and I felt that they looked just like me. I had this unexplainable feeling in my body, and after this point I knew that Ghana was my home and this was where I wanted to go. I was sort of nervous about going to Ghana because so many people told me that a lot of African people have sour feelings toward African American/Black People because they are "Pure Blood," whereas my blood is mixed which a lot of different things including Caucasian blood. But when I arrived in Ghana, I was told constantly by people that I was not African American, but I was just Ghanaian. When I would talk to people they would have a surprised look on their face because they expected me to have an "African accent." I was in a place where everyone looked like me, and accepted me. Now I consider myself a Ghanaian! Yes Ghana is my country!

Returning home from Ghana, West Africa was hard for me. I cried constantly for a lot of days. I felt that I had to go back to this horrible "racist world." Here I am considered a Black Man, again instead of a "Brotha" like I was in Ghana. I am also back to a world where I have to constantly defend myself - to a place where I am the minority. Back to a land where I am constantly judged because of the color of my skin before they even get to know me: I listen to hip-hop, am violent, play basketball, live in the ghetto, am on welfare, am on drugs, and eat fried chicken. I almost feel like I have to change myself to avoid being perceived as the stereotypical black man. I cannot even bring fried chicken to lunch, or drink my grape soda. I want to be a person that is very successful and changes the opinions of others about my race.

I attended the National Student Diversity Leadership Conference that took place last week and was for diversity leaders who went to independent schools. Over 1,300 students arrived there from all around the country - all races, sexual orientations, religions, socio economics, and genders. My favorite moment at this conference occurred when we were split into different rooms based on our race and gender. I was in a room full of black men. I was not sure what to expect from this session, but this session was life changing. I almost felt like I was back home in Ghana. These men were very intelligent, and also wanted change, and I was so proud of my people. The most powerful part of this session occurred when everyone in the room locked arms and sang "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (The Black National Anthem). There was power in hearing these deep black voices singing this song and I had new hope of trying to make my school, my city, my country, and the world more embracing of diversity.

I remember the face of this one little boy in Ghana. He was an orphan, and his parents had both past away from HIV/Aids. I remember how big his eyes were and how big and white his smile was. Looking at this child I saw a lot of potential in his face. He could be the person that is able to find a cure for cancer or HIV/Aids. This boy is the hope for me that the world will one day see the potential in every child no matter where he or she is from. We are all one and we should all love one another.

OBI UDEZEH

freshman, The Kiski School

“What We Think of Ourselves”

I am apart of a program called Boys Club of New York Independent School Program, which is a program that gets local inner city kids with a lot of potential in academics and athletics and gets them into prep schools and provides them with the help they need to succeed in these schools. Every week they would schedule meetings that brought together about 30 kids who got into prep schools through them and we would discuss things about prep school, and whats ahead of us in this new life. Some topics were “How to succeed academically at an independent school,” “You Should,” “What we think of ourselves,” and “The after effect” which brought some alumni to the boys club to walk to us.

One week during the summer I was in Manhattan at the Boys Club of NY head office, attending one of these meetings with other people who were attending a prep school and in the Boys Club organization. The majority of the kids in the room were African American and Hispanic. The topic of the days discussion was “What we think of ourselves” and “Being told you should do something because of race”.

A guest speaker came in and introduced himself to us, as we did the same to him. He told us his prep school experienced and his four years were very exciting and held many good surprises. He started the main discussion by asking, “When I say ‘African American male’ what do you think of? What comes to your mind?” We were all sitting in a circle, and he went around the whole circle getting the same answers in response: African American males being athletic, bald, playing basketball, playing football, selling drugs, running track, having muscular body, and having corn rolls.

After he asked, “When you hear Hispanic male what do you think of?” And every one said, Mexicans that wear Jordan sneakers, can’t speak proper English, have a lot of kids, are never legal, are gang bangers, and always carries knives. Then he said “Is that everything?” and we still added more and more stereotypes that people made up about us. But also by us saying these things, they were what we thought of ourselves. He then took a long pause and looked at every single one of us and then said, “So you all think of yourself as ignorant, reckless, gang banging, only good for sports, illegal people?” And we all started to notice what he was trying to get at. Then he said, “Because I basically asked what you guys think of yourselves and your answers were horrible.” After he asked, “Who here is smart in science, math, English, or any subject in school?” and we all raised our hands with a lot of pride. Then he asked, “If you guys all think you’re smart, aren’t the majority of you African American or Hispanic?” “So why didn’t I get any answers saying smart, intelligent, doctors, lawyers or governors?” This whole “activity” had a very big meaning behind it, and through it we all realized that we’re letting people’s stereotypes sink into our heads and make it what we live by. He wanted us to realize that we’re better than what people think of us, and we really got the message that day.

The next topic he started off by saying, “I went to a prep school myself, and once you arrive on campus they’re going to ask what sports you play. And if you say basketball they’re going to instantly tell you you should play football. Even if you want to run cross country.” He told us don’t let these “you should’s” become “you have to’s” and that what ever you want to do, you do it. Then he told us to take a look at him, this guy was at least 6’5 and maybe 250 pounds. Then he asked, “what sports do you think I played?” and we all responded basketball and that’s it. Then he told us he started off with basketball but he didn’t like it, so he tried Squash in the Winter, and Shooting in the Spring. He said he loved these two sports and stayed with them for all four years while he was at prep school. And every time he was seen on the squash court or outside shooting, people would always say, “you should be playing basketball and football, and running track.” But he did not let them determine what he actually will be doing.

JING DAISY ZHU

senior, Winchester Thurston School

The Banana Generation

Few years back, a personality quiz, “What type of Asian are you?” swept the internet like those fast growing mushrooms after a heavy rain. Out of curiosity, I clicked through the choices and submitted the answer—“Congratulations, you are a mango!” was my result. As I read through the explanation, I smiled. Mango was perfect for me.

I moved to the States when I was fifteen, feeling less worried about being discriminated against. I used to believe that yellow skin is a cultural knot that ties all Asians. In America, a melting pot that feeds the first, the second, and the third generation of Asian immigrants, it is hard to feel like a stranger. All the way from the airport in Chicago to Fifth Avenue in Pittsburgh, the prevalent Asian communities strengthened my backbone. This unique Asian phenotype hits home.

I live with my aunt, uncle, and their children--my young cousins, Catherine and Bryan. Although both of them were born and raised in Pittsburgh, the strong family culture taught them Asian discipline. I was impressed with their respectful manners around the elders, who in turn, rewarded them with a pat on the back. Once in a while, Cathy and Bryan would have an on-the-plate chopstick fight for the last dumpling or the remaining noodles. It is fun to watch. We only speak English when we go out, for Chinese is mandatory at home especially in the presence of our grandparents. Cathy and Bryan’s Chinese are excellent besides the occasional pronunciation errors, which I have tried to correct ever since I started tutoring.

In the shade of a family-proof Asian culture I grew up with, life is blithe.

Sometimes, my aunt and uncle bring us to dinner parties, most likely, the Asian ones. The adults would chat while the kids, group by age, occupy themselves with whatever fun they can find in the host’s basement and backyard. A month after I settled in Pittsburgh, we were invited to a dinner party by one of uncle’s colleagues. Catherine and I automatically joined the older kids group whereas Bryan, who is ten years younger, bonded with another. For this all-Asian dinner party, I tossed away all of my concerns because I knew, from living with my two cousins for a month, that cultural bonds form a harbor for my feet to rest during a life-long journey.

Three teenagers were watching a movie when Cathy and I joined them in the living room. I guessed the movie went for too long, a girl turned off the movie and started a conversation among five of us. She playfully complained how dull the movie was by cracking a joke, which I did not understand, but everyone else laughed.

“By the way, I am Miranda. This is Chris and Lily. What’s your name?”

“I am Catherine, and it’s my cousin, Daisy.”

Miranda seemed interested in knowing more about us; she asked what our summer plans are and where we go to school. I told her that it was my first month being in the States and was about to start tenth grade that fall.

“That’s sweet! How do you like here so far?” Lily asked me.

Having four audiences, I had an impromptu speech about how my life had been changed in one month and how grateful I felt towards my family. My English was quite poor at that time; had they not been Chinese Americans, I would not expose my weakness completely to people I just met. But because we share the same heritage, I assumed I would be forgiven. For some expressions I did not know how to say in English, I threw in some Chinese slangs which I supposed they would understand.

We sat around a rectangular coffee table, where the enthusiastic chatting took place. At first, the other three teenagers could not wait to tell me about their schools, their favorite rock bands, TV shows, video games, books, and parties, which I found having more differences than mutualities with my own. Although Lily, Miranda, and Chris had their own unique tastes in music or movies, they, after all, belonged to one group the same way as tulips and roses are categorized as hermaphrodite flowers. I, on the other hand, am a different species--maybe a maple or a pine tree. When I began to tell my stories, they all became quiet and listened with respect. Maybe it was my voice that sounded soothing or the story itself was fascinating; after a while, all of them, even Cathy, assembled themselves to one end of the table and listened as I spoke. Though I knew they did not mean to isolate me, I still felt a pungent pill was dissolving on my tongue.

The coffee table between us was the Pacific Ocean—I was unable to swim through and was about to drown.

For that “What type of Asian are you?” quiz Cathy got “banana.” I read its explanation, and frowned. Banana was perfect for her.

One day I was tutoring my grandma some simple English. When encountering the word “victory” she had a hard time pronouncing it right because Chinese language does not have a “V” sound, the closest being a “W” sound. I told grandma to bite her bottom lip with upper teeth, to lessen the Chinese accent.

“Why would you want to hide the Chinese accent?” Grandma’s tone was often so vague that I could never figure out if she was asking a rhetorical question.

“I’m not trying to hide my Chinese accent,” I lied.

But the sudden surge of blood underneath my skin told the truth—I felt I betrayed my own race. One thing I had been working on after I came to the States was to improve my spoken English, which, to me, is the first proof of “getting used to the culture.” I listened to how other people speak and tried mimic the accent. I was taught British English when I was younger, so some adjustment is needed to be sounded like a native speaker. Sometimes, I would record what I said to purge the flaws. As time went by, I started to act like my American friends: my speech was loaded with slangs and was done in American accent. Every once in a while, people would make compliment about my spoken English, “you do not sound you just moved to the States.” I was proud. But I did not realize that I was on the brim of turning my back on my race.

One year ago at another party of all race, an Asian woman, I noticed by accident, avoided talking to any other race but the whites the entire time. When she came across some Asians while getting food, she pretended not to see them at all. She has freedom to talk to whomever she wants, but her trying to camouflage her race enraged me.

What was there she felt ashamed of?

What was there that I felt ashamed of that I needed to change the way I talk and act?

I thought about the personality quiz I had done three years ago. The explanation for mango was, “Yellow on the outside and yellow on the inside—Asians act like Asians.” Back then I had not been exposed to too much western cultures. Banana, on the other hand, refers to “yellow on the outside and white on the inside—Asians act white.” It is perfect for Cathy, Bryan, and other three kids I met at my first party because of their heritage and the culture they grew up in. However, when I saw what Cathy got for that quiz, I told myself my next goal was to become a banana because I felt it would be relatively easy for me to survive in this society—I need to adapt to foreign nutrients and soils. I also thought that I can always switch back to mango if I go to Asia.

But in reality, it might be impossible to become a mango or at least a plump mango again. A simple proof is my gradual decreasing in Chinese literature, which I had valued more than anything before I learned A, B, C. Also I was wrong when I wanted to become banana because it means to abandon the culture I am grasping. Worst of all, my grandparents would tell me that the way I act or the way I think are evidently different from I used to do.

One part of me has been lost.

I guess a majority of Asian immigrants are facing this sensitive yet confound dilemma. To this day, I am still not insightful enough to find a way to make up for my cultural loss. But at least when I am aware of this, I would be more careful about to what extent I should scrape off my yellowness, which indeed, I felt ashamed of doing.

Today, if you ask “What type of Asian am I?” I wish I could say, “Mango!” with confidence.

poetry

First Place

ELENA JACKENDOFF
senior, Pittsburgh CAPA

Hace un viaje en la luz de la luna

I. Hombres Enmascarados: Masked Men

Sitting quietly in a booth in the back of a Mexican restaurant, twiddling thumbs and looking away from me, addressing me in a Spanish I could not decipher, too quick, too accented to understand. Hair black and greased back, parted on the side, shaved close on the neck. Blue polo stained with smears of salsa or guacamole, apron tied tight around the waist. Nervous, always nervous. An ageless man, encounters beyond the stress levels normal men can handle. Perhaps he is ashamed of what he has done, or perhaps he is scared that someone will know, will turn him in, and ruin what he has accomplished. Or perhaps he is numb.

They sent me home with nothing. Waiting for
the night to fall, they followed us by moonlight.
They came with black masks, stars that shined implored
defeat. Their guns in slings begged for the lining

of our clothing, for our savings. Sand hid
in creases as they squinted, shouting to
the women to strip for them. I know they pinched
and prodded, raped and swore at them. So shrewd,

they knew how they could bend their own games' rules.
I kept my money with my breakfast creamer—
they would not, could not bother with foolish
creamers. I took my money to America,

and I told broken men I kept it so
our celebration could last 'til morning.

*Vaya, vaya, vaya
con Dios, a una tierra de quimeras,
una tierra de justicia.*

*Go, go, go
with God, to a land of illusions,
a land of justice.*

II. Pulseras: Bracelets

A couple sits together in their living room, temporary at best, telenovelas muted behind them and then soccer games ignored behind them. Holding hands, only breaking to help one of their children up onto the tattered, plaid couch—or to pick up a toy that's accidentally fallen onto the linoleum tile. A thread between them so deep, so meaningful and you must hope they stay together, if only because of their story. The children traipse in and out of the room, boas around necks and smiles cut deeply into their cheeks, staring imploringly at my notebook, dragging toys behind them or thumbs in mouths, they watch. They do not seem to care about the words, they do not seem to listen, or perhaps they do not understand. But they seem good-hearted and

happy, and that should be enough.

Oaxaca must be where the saints all march,
where compassion pairs with generosity.
Despite our six failed crosses, losing all
our money, finding *la mujer* saved grace.

She must be a divine human; could not know
our tongue, her daughter translated for us.
She gave us every peso possible.
Her eight-year-old child gave us blessings.

We need to find and praise their divinity,
for nobody here could give up all they had
to strangers. Bracelet money brought wishes
to fruition. Thankfully the saint was kind.

So softly wrinkled, sitting in deep thought,
just waiting for a chance to help those without.

*Una tierra delicada, un lugar
para los seres vivos, un lugar
para trabajar, para existir.*

*A delicate land, a place
for the living, a place
to work, to exist.*

III. Funcionamiento: Functioning

He looks me in the eye, is more confident in his journey, in being here. He understands the risk he has taken, understands what he must do to stay and how he will commit to his expectations. He will save, scrimp on buying new pants and shoes because only the money matters in the end, only bringing his family matters in the end. The most confident in his decisions, he will not squander his created opportunity, he will not impregnate another woman, he will not drink away his loneliness, and he will not gamble away his earnings. More serious than the rest, he fully seems to understand his eventual reward.

When immigration there sends you home,
they send you without your things; the coyotes
never keep deals, choosing to steal our money
placed carefully in sticky bags of jelly.

Police chases force adrenaline to
pump furiously, and if you can't race,
if your toes are too scraped, if your lungs eschew
air, your salted beads of fear will percolate

to bedrock. Traffickers stop you mid-way,
shove guns to necks, and sweat will stick to dirt.
Escape is only over the highway
marker arbitrarily lodged in earth.

If shoes wear through and knees don't bend, continue
until bile and tears stop emanating.

*Entiende los personajes, entiende
la contingencia— toma el único riesgo
que vale la pena.*

*Understand the people, understand
the contingency—take the only risk
that is worth the effort.*

IV. Credo: Creed

Sitting in a cold house on a winter morning, surrounded by others who do not speak the language you speak. There are some that do, some that simply come to watch the foreigner ask personal questions. Some just want the company. She giggles nervously and holds her head in her hands, rocking back and forth in the wooden chair, staring out of the fogged window. Another offers bits of chicken and tortilla, but all decline the food. She tugs at her hair and gestures wildly to show her love, her enthusiasm. She sleeps in the next room, holes in the wall plugged with socks and spare clothing; I don't think she sleeps much, I don't think any of them sleep much in that rickety house, up on a muddy hill, cedar boards, mushy beneath the weight of snow, lead to a door, which leads to a kitchen which leads everywhere else. They are always together, separated only by work, miles away on a dark road. I don't think any of them have seen snow before this winter, all new here, all new.

One whiny sniveling girl gossips to
another, wondering if she should call
long distance, trying to find her one true
love that will send money after weeks of small

flirtations bantered, but if things don't work
as planned, he may become benefactor
in place of love. He will send grainy pictures
to secure a bride. She carries life on her

back, justifying aches with riches ahead,
or else her love. She leaves seven brothers
and sisters, just in case he disappoints.
She agrees, if only for her betterment.

Besides, she can leave home, it's calm, at least
for now. She needn't worry about her creed.

*Sobrevive con dignidad, con sentimientos
satisfechos, con acuerdo, con la comprensión
de la realidad*

*Survive with dignity, with satisfied
feelings, with understanding, with the comprehension
of reality.*

V. Remachado: Riveting

He begins quietly, an understatement of his achievements, eyes darting passionately around the room, searching for conclusions to come to, realizations to have. His voice builds, builds, and suddenly quiets when he realizes what he is saying in a room full of people that know nothing of his illegal activity. He doesn't want to tell me any of this, I think he is ashamed of what he has done, I think he is ashamed of what he has done. Perhaps he knows that I won't judge him, and this is why he will talk to me, or maybe he needs to tell someone, anyone, and I was the first person to ask. His hands reach out suddenly at the crescendo of his tale, pulling through the air for some unspoken idea.

I came by train with strangers; we were caught,
spent days in swamps, our nail beds shriveling
in the acid. Near the road, slumped down, we saw
a pious corps that vowed food and salvation.

The next train sped faster, blowing small twigs
beneath my eyelids; I fell off the end
and slammed my head. We snuck back there and hid
in cars. Police came to search and gassed the train.

We opened doors and were forcibly flung;
we ran until our limbs collapsed in piles,
walking six days, six nights with nothing but
the skin of our knuckles. A man took pity

and saved us. He gave us water as his testament
to kindness, an act not without benefits.

*El fin justifica los medios, la ilegalidad,
el perforando intenciones, la desintegración
de la moralidad, de la manera.*

*The end justifies the means, the illegality,
the perforated intentions, the disintegration
of morality, of the way.*

VI. Enviando: Sending

The first man, wife listening in another room until she decides she must protect him, even if she does not understand what he is saying, children nearby in the living room, giggling and wrestling, falling all over the couch, tumbling around, holding a fake tea party on the floor with an imaginary tea set. He speaks in English, laughs at his misfortune, laughs at his crime. He tries to make light, as much as he possibly can, of what he and his wife have done, have seen. Entirely uncomfortable in English, he continues partially in Spanish, an interjected sol or camino pulled from thin air. Entirely too many laughs for such a serious story. His wife, pregnant with a third, or possibly fourth, sits by, holding herself with pride, for she does not grasp what he is saying, what he is telling me. She does not make eye contact, not once.

I haven't felt anticipation since
that pock-faced man wielded both thickened tongue
and sharpened knife at father's pulsing wince.
Three crossings speak for nothing save my plugged

ambition. When I walked, I saw police
and even they thought I belonged; they smiled
at me. Once, with a wife with child, leasing
the service of coyote number five,

he left us when he thought he could be caught—
there's no protection in the desert. Watching
a lonely sunrise, tears pooled, fusing wrought
light, we thanked Jesus for the gift, expecting

fingers at our necks any second, sending
us away without care for where we would stop.

*La única manera de quedarse en vivo,
de apoyar una familia, de hallar el perdido
camino, la perdida sobriedad.*

The only way to stay alive
to support a family, to find the lost
way, the lost simplicity.

Runner-Up

FREDDIE-MAE STEWART

junior, The Neighborhood Academy

All Sides of Me

I am a black woman
but you'd never know
because outwardly
it doesn't really show

I was raised in the culture's
music and slang
but that is not all
that I truly am

I don't forget to take pride
in what others see
on the outside
and alternately the inside of me

Dad gave me Puerto Rico
my long wild hair
and I'd love to go see the culture
that culture inside of me

My skin and face
were gifts from both parents
ancient lines of natives
lace themselves between us

Two tribes live within me
Cherokee and Blackfoot
and I carry pride for both
individually unique

and last
but not forgotten
the bland simplicity of white
ties me all together

like the white on a canvas
it is my base
from both parents
is loved

Honorable Mentions

KATIE FREEMAN

freshman, Carrick High School

All the Same

I don't care what you look like
Or about the clothes you wear.
I don't care where you live,
Whether it's here or there.

Where you work doesn't matter
What you drive doesn't either.
You still get to the same place,
Whether you walk, crawl, or fly there.

It's on the inside that counts.
To me we're the same.
I get to know before I judge
Or else I'd live in shame.

LILY NGUYEN

freshman, Winchester Thurston High School

“Beautiful”

There was once
Two young people
One a boy
The other a girl
The girl walked alone
Drowning in tears
Walking and writing wearily
In her torn diary
How she hated her dark skin
How she hated humiliation
How she wished everyone
Would just accept her
For who she was
The boy walked alone as well
Deep in thought
Thinking wearily
About his day
How he made fun of someone's skin
How he acted superior to them
How he wished he could take back
All of his words
These two people walked the same street
As they passed each other
The boy said to the girl
“You are beautiful”
The girl stopped in disbelief
Her dark, milk chocolate skin
Beautiful

fiction

JUHYE KIM

senior, Winchester Thurston School

“Vestige of Friendship”

I still remember the rush of emotions that ran through my head when my dad announced that our family would be moving to the United States: excitement, fear, and sadness. I had never stepped foot outside of South Korea in the eight years that I had been alive, so living in another country seemed like an adventure to me; however, the thought of leaving my friends and relatives brought tears to my eyes. The plane ride over was the longest sixteen hours of my life. My grandmother’s watery eyes and her quivering lips trying to force a smile as she waved to us at the gate were still vivid in my mind.

A month had passed since my parents and I moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but I still had not adjusted properly. Sure I fell in love with the big open field near our house, the squirrels that I have never been able to see roaming the streets in Korea, and the backyard that was only granted to those who lived on the first floor of the three-story apartment complex, but I wasn’t ready to call it my home yet. It wasn’t until Jasmine came along that my home-sickness was mitigated.

I met Jasmine for the first time in the public laundry room with coin-operated machines. She seemed to be around my age, but we looked nothing alike. Her exotic beauty was resplendent, and I could tell that my own looks could not emulate hers. She had chocolate-brown skin, big round eyes with long, curly eyelashes that I had always wanted, and voluminous lips to complement her oval-shaped face. She appeared to be magnanimous, but I felt nervous because of something my parents had belabored.

“I want you to be cautious when you are around black people, do you understand?” my parents warned. Being a little girl, I was gullible. I truly believed that they could be bad people. But it was ignorance that led our family to think this way. There aren’t many colored people in our country, and anything we knew about them was influenced by the media. We did not know, which of course cannot excuse us for being racist, but it was our first time in a foreign country, making us uneasy.

Jasmine introduced herself to me and asked me for my name. I told her “Grace,” the American name I had taken that was closest to the meaning of my real name (God’s grace) then quickly left the room. That was the last time I saw her until school started one month later.

We were both enrolled in the elementary school a few blocks away from the apartment. I was a nervous wreck on the first day of school; I felt miserable as I dragged my feet into the school after crying to my parents begging for them to accompany me. Although I took lessons for a year, I hardly spoke English: I only knew some words and phrases, not ready to have full conversations with anyone. My abortive attempts to make friends discouraged me, and I quickly became an outcast. At lunch I sat alone, feeling paranoid from the whispers and stares of others. I just wanted the day to be over; I would go home and tell my parents that we had to move back to Korea immediately.

“Hi Grace. I finally found you! I thought it was you in my math class,” a voice said. I looked up to see Jasmine. I flashed a shy grin and looked down at my food tray again. She set her tray down and sat next to me. She was very energetic and talkative, and even though I did not understand some of the things she had said, she made me feel happy. I let out a genuine laugh for the first time that day, and we instantly connected like two puzzle pieces. We talked (I mostly listened) all through lunch and recess. I was drawn to her bright personality, and I began to disregard the color of her skin. As the weeks went on, our friendship grew stronger by the day. She taught me to let go of my prejudices, and I began to talk to the other kids as well. I became very sociable, but Jasmine remained my best friend.

Our friendship also helped my parents get over their prejudice ways. After a few times she slept over our house, they saw her for who she was on the inside. She had impeccable manners and treated my parents with respect. She made it hard not to give her the same admiration back. She and her family took me to the best food places in the city, and I learned to adjust to the new culture. In turn we invited them over for Korean dinners, and I showed Jasmine the games I used to play. She helped me decorate my room and got me hooked on to “The Powerpuff Girls.” I nearly mastered the English language in six months thanks to her, and she learned how to write her name in Korean.

Over the next two years we became inseparable, attached-to-the-hips, whatever you wanted to call it. We made friendship bracelets for each other, played on the same softball team, went to the same summer camp, joined the girl scouts, and called each other’s parents our own. So when my dad’s job required us to move to Philadelphia, I was heartbroken. I didn’t know how I would tell her. I had to leave again. When I told her, she kept calm. I was emotionally tenuous, and she could feel it. She wanted to be the strong one, so that I could lean on her. She held back her nascent tears and comforted me.

“We’ll stay in touch,” she assured me, “there’s nothing that can keep us apart.” We promised that no matter what, we would have a reunion in eight years, when we turned into adults. The night before my family’s departure, Jasmine was over at our house as usual and had dinner. The atmosphere seemed heavy, and the mood was depressing. No one said a word besides the occasional requests to pass the dishes around. The dinner table seemed abandoned with the rest of the furniture and possessions already shipped to our new location. After dinner Jasmine and I went to my bedroom.

“Here, I want you to have this,” I showed her a small clear vase and tons of colorful paper.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I’m going to teach you how to fold a paper crane using these papers,” I handed her a sheet and put one in front of me. I slowly showed her all the steps; being a quick learner, she memorized the whole process after making one.

“There is a legend that promises a wish if you fold one thousand cranes,” I said, “just something to keep you occupied and something to remind you of me.”

“Thank you,” she replied, this time not being able to control her tears. “I have something for you as well.” She showed me a wooden box about the size of a shoe box. Inside it there were several items that I recognized: ticket stubs from the zoo, baseball games, movies, and amusement parks; our soft ball team’s shirt; pictures of us goofing around; and our friendship bracelets. I was surprised that she had kept everything.

“This is our time capsule,” she said. I was still confused, so she began to explain.

“We keep our treasures in this box and bury it. Then when it is time for us to meet again, we’ll open it and recall the precious memories.” I loved it; it was perfect. We wrote a letter to each other, and without allowing the other to read it, we sealed them into the box. Time went by so quickly, especially because I wanted it to freeze. The sun rose to tell us it was time to go. And with that, we were gone.

Eight years passed, and the memories seemed to have faded with the years. We stopped emailing each other about the time high school started. I felt distant from her, and I wasn’t sure if she even remembered me. I had made new friends and adjusted to my new school. At times the nostalgia would kick in, but I waved it off. Assuming that Jasmine probably did the same, I ignored our promise to meet. I was sure that it would be awkward between us now. That night I was trying to focus on my homework when my mom yelled to me.

“You better get out here right now. This is not good,” she said hysterically.

I ran out to the living room where my parents were watching the news.

“...an eighteen-year-old African-American girl named Jasmine Haines dead after a school shooting in Pittsburgh. Police reports the shooter was a Caucasian male who lost control under the influence of racism. After a feud with fellow African-American classmates, the shooter brought a gun to school and shot five students...” Everything after that blurred, and I couldn’t hear anymore. My mom rushed to my side to hug me, but all I felt was horror. It couldn’t be her. It couldn’t be the girl I know, I kept telling myself. I was in denial because everything was so abstruse; I didn’t know how to react. I felt abhor to racism. I was under its spell once, but I snapped out of it.

The next day my parents and I took a flight back to our apartment in Pittsburgh. Jasmine’s parents were still residing in our old apartment. The moment they saw me they burst out in tears and pulled me close. We did not have to exchange words to describe how we felt at that moment. While my parents and Jasmine’s dad talked, her mom pulled me aside.

“Here,” she handed a box to me, “she dug this out a week ago hoping you would come.” It was the time capsule. So she did remember. I was overcome with guilt. With grief, I opened it and saw all the things we left in there eight years ago. I picked up the pictures gently with my hands. A drop of water landed on our smiling faces; the picture began to blur as my eyes were clouded with tears. I held the picture against my chest and forced a smile. I searched the box and took out her letter. It read:

“Dear Grace, I can’t believe you’re moving away tomorrow. Don’t worry, you’ll always be a part of me, and when we meet again I want to see that smile of yours. I’m glad we have this box to keep our memories in, although if we tried to stash all of them in here, there wouldn’t be enough room! I wonder what we would look like in eight years. I can see ourselves opening this box and giggling. I can’t wait for that day already. Nothing can keep us apart: a part of me is with you, and a part of you is with me. Stay in touch! Love, Jasmine.”

I let out a frustrated scream along with my tears. The girl who helped me overcome racism was now a victim of it. I couldn’t believe it. The world was so unfair. I crawled up in a ball and pulled my knees to my chest, hoping that would numb the pain exuding from my heart. I was all alone in what used to be Jasmine’s room. It hadn’t changed much except for the warmth

that seemed to be missing along with her big heart. I shivered as I put my head down in between my knees. I couldn't stop the tears that flooded my eyes, and after awhile it was hard to breathe. I gently ran my hand over the top of the time capsule, hoping to grasp a piece of Jasmine. I held the box close to me: the only vestige of my brave friend, Jasmine.

