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FEB 17 2016

City of Kirkwood

Robertson I

10

1st Place

Brenna Robertson

Change Starts with Me

Human rights issues pervade the history of the United States even though according to the nation's Declaration of Independence, "all men are created equal that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." In U.S. history, I learned about the conflict regarding the interpretation of the Declaration of Independence's words--"all men"; I learned about the white, anglo-saxon, protestants who claimed superiority over immigrants and blacks; I learned about the gender discrimination somewhat smoothed over by the adoption of the nineteenth amendment (women's right to vote). Discrimination existed then and exists now. Today's perception of inequalities, shrouded by past atrocities, miss the convoluted class divisions, race relations, and prejudices apparent in cities such as prestigious Kirkwood, MO. The healing of hidden wounds in the Kirkwood community lies first in the education of the problem and recognition of the need for change.

An outsider who looks into this well-to-do area sees not a community troubled with race relations but instead a facade of a culture without trouble. The Kirkwood community stands alone as a secluded bubble within the world. Kirkwood High School grads return to live in their hometown and no one leaves. This St. Louis suburb proves a perfect place to raise children. Yes, these assumptions ring true, but they fail to negate the divisions in the eleventh grade at Kirkwood High School. Lack of diversity stifles the divisions of race and class. The smart white kids thrive in AP classes where the class resembles a canvas with very little color present to

“ruin its purity.” I, personally, am not faced with the conflicts between races because I do not come into contact with other races due to my schedule and interests. How can I help if I don’t know what other cultures feel? How can I help if I, a sixteen year old caucasian female, can’t commensurate with their pain of discrimination? How can I help mend class divisions when my family hasn’t had trouble buying Nike shoes or expensive looking clothes? I have always seemed to fit in. How can I help those who appear different if I don’t recognize my own awkwardness? How can I help when I can’t identify with others?

The solution starts with knowledge. Before beliefs take root in the heart, the individual must know and understand. Identifying with other people takes hearing their story. I participated in situations in St. Louis where in order to bless other people I sat and listened, asked questions and waited for their answers. North of Delmar Boulevard, the city’s racial divide, I sat down in a woman’s dining room and listened to the reason she lived in the bad neighborhood she did; I heard her desire to share the grace of God with her neighbors who experience the horror of shootings and drugs. Hearing her story, I bridged the ethnic gap. Holding her hand while she remembered her husband, I ignored the discrepancy of class inequality, rich versus poor. Healing only happens when individuals realize wounds require attention. My AP Language and Composition class, led by the conviction of Ms. DePasquale, has acted to learn from Normandy Middle School students. Building relationship with these African American middle school students doesn’t lie in bombarding them with questions about their situation, Normandy School District lost accreditation and they live differently than “Kirkwoodians”, but building relationship lies in answering their questions about high school and talking about little curiosities. Relationship leads to deeper conversations about change and provides a platform to

work together on approaching human rights. Relationship multiplies knowledge, but what a person does with that knowledge is up to them.

Hand-in-hand with knowledge comes the responsibility to see and apply the understanding of the issue. The recognition that problems exist in Kirkwood isn't for the faint at heart. Yes, administrators at the high school care about the issues brought to light through student efforts like going to Normandy for a day, but the application isn't practical if students and teachers aren't willing to go the extra mile. The place to start a revolution of equality and justice lies in the heart of the individual. The transforming actions of humans must start within their own hearts first. Gender equality issues didn't stop with the adoption the nineteenth amendment, instead the issue today is broader with the inclusion of the treatment of homosexuals. Race inequality didn't stop with the abolition of slavery. Class division didn't stop with making the rich give to the poor. No, the interpretation of these issues and their importance weighs on the hearts of people of all ages. I can only change my heart and my prejudices. I cannot force someone in Kirkwood to change their racist views, but I can start a revolution by example. Relationship begins between two people--me and another. Change begins with me. I need to sit down and become acquainted with *them*, to know *them*--the hurting, the outsiders, the African Americans, the lower income whites, etc.. My revolution in looking at human rights starts with the knowledge from relationship and application for change. Knowing the problem alters nothing without my recognition of the need for change.

The goal of fostering human rights stands a noble desire. However, transformation begins with an individual's thirst for justice and equality for all. In Kirkwood, just as any other area, change in the treatment of race, economic, and gender discrimination will only take place with

bridges built, hearts changed, and action taken. The community could begin this effort for equality by joining together and sitting down for group discussions between those who live with the label of Meacham Park and the white suburbanites who come from money. I could participate in beginning this movement by encouraging discussions, beginning relationships, and gathering together people from every area of life. I will only touch a few with my love for them, but, by my example, those I touch may reach more and then those people more. I can and will try my best to start a chain reaction, yet I cannot do this alone. Kirkwood will only transform through the thoughtfulness of many people, but once Kirkwood advocates for human rights the community may touch St. Louis county, St. Louis city, Missouri, and beyond. Our nation claims that "all men are created equal that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." Today, this can come true through sacrificing time and selfishness to listen, recognize, and apply what we learn from each other.

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City of Kirkwood

Justin Sweeney (1)

Name: Justin Sweeney

1

2nd Place

From segregation to reintegration

I walk through the KHS hallway, but there's no equality. Consumed by the high school social hierarchy, I watch students submit to its unfair ways. To the left, an entire group of black kids, untouched by any other color. To the right, an all-girl group of whites. Jocks, financially unstable students, and homosexuals all stand apart. We supposedly live in a culture where everyone is free and equal, but that's hardly the case. We've segregated ourselves.

I can't walk into the cafeteria without seeing the big chasm engraved within the student body. With one or two odd exceptions, black is by black, and white is by white. In the classroom, I witness teachers accidentally and subconsciously stereotype blacks. In the library, I watch an African American student receive punishment for an act a white student would typically be pardoned for. Separation isn't fair. Division doesn't foster justice. Society isn't divided by hair color or height, so race shouldn't be any different? In order to progress towards a better tomorrow, we need to look at our racially diverse peers and ask ourselves: "would I act or feel this way if they were just like me?" The

simple answer is no. As soon as we recognize differences in skin color are as insignificant as differences in eye color, we can start to blend racial and ethnic cultures to improve the Kirkwood community and high school environment.

I imagine myself deprived of a full breakfast. I'd go to school with an empty stomach and a brain too unnourished to learn. I may be smart and hardworking, but without a healthy diet, I can't focus in class, act to my best moral ability, or maintain my grades. My clothes are old, my hygiene is poor, and I have to work a minimum wage job for hours after school to help support my family. This isn't my life, but the thought terrifies me. For several KHS students, food deprivation is an everyday ordeal. These kids are often singled out, abandoned, and emotionally hurt. Once again, students can only find acceptance by putting themselves in others' shoes. If you couldn't put on clean clothes everyday, would you want to be labeled as "disgusting?" If you were under the stress of sleeping in a car night after night, would you be willing to take additional bullying everyday at school? Teachers need to make efforts to uncover these hardships among their students so they can work with them to improve their lifestyle. Peers, likewise, need to offer emotional support to build them up, instead of tearing them down. Without acceptance and aid, these students will never be able to compete with the average high schooler.

For a moment, I stopped at the new gender neutral bathroom while walking to class. Then, on morning announcements, I hear messages from the Gay-Straight Alliance club, one of the largest clubs in the building. I feel lucky to have a school that is supportive of students of all genders and sexualities, but this isn't typical nationwide. It

does, however, give me hope. People, schools, and communities can change for the better. In order to foster human rights, our community needs to accept that change is possible. And not only is it possible, we can change with minimal effect on our everyday life. We need to cherish empathy and sympathy as necessary qualities. In order to enact change, we need to put ourselves in other's shoes. Because no one, of any race, sexuality, or income, is exactly the same.

Someday I'll walk through the KHS hallway, and there will be equality. Consumed by a sense of equality, students will submit to the importance of caring for others. To the left, I'll see a group of mixed races and ethnicities. To the right, a multi-gender group. Everyone will feel accepted, happy, and important. We supposedly live in a culture where everyone is free and equal, and that will be the case. We've segregated ourselves, and we can reintegrate us.

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City of Kirkwood

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3rd Place

Mary Kate Brennan, 16

Perspective and Dusty Boxes

On my first day of Journalism 1 in January of my freshman year, I learned that we are people first and journalists second. We're trained to carry this basic code of ethics with us in every interview and interaction because our stories never outweigh our role as humans. In Kirkwood, we often forget about our role as a person first, and preference second. We're are so wrapped up in our race, religion, and political views that we stop embodying a human, and instead embody our beliefs. Especially on the topic of race, we shirk away from humanity and instead resort to our respective preference. Change in this issue requires uncomfortability. Change requires throwing out our preconceived notions and putting our role as people before our other roles.

This February, a group of thirty Kirkwood students, including myself, visited Normandy Middle School for a day. Our trip was a continuation of a visit with Normandy students from last Fall. When I got on the bus that day, I expected a run down building, with patched up windows and burly security guards. I expected the inner city school the media projected. When I walked into the school, the first words out of my mouth were "This could be Nipher." Normandy Middle

School looks like Nipher Middle School. There are lockers and classrooms and the windows aren't patched up. There were security guards, but they greeted us with smiles. I wondered why I didn't expect this, but I knew. Because of my preconceived notions and the media, I thought Normandy was an outlier. The more I talked to these students, the more I realized their reputation didn't fit them. They aren't wild or uncivilized. They're just as bright and just as capable as Kirkwood students. The demographic of Normandy is the school's standout difference from Kirkwood. I go to a school of 1800 with a 20% African American population, yet we have one full-time African American teacher. Both of my AP classes are 100% white. Out of all three of my honors classes, there is one African American student. Entering a school where I am a minority made me realize what the African American students at my school experience every day. The stares, the whispers all scream, "You don't belong here!" For the first time in my life, I was the minority group.

How can we change our preconceived notions? How can we get back to our roots as people? We can start with educating ourselves about how Kirkwood came to be this way. We learn history so we can learn from our mistakes, but in Kirkwood, we don't learn about *our* history. We learn about national and global events, but we don't learn why Meacham Park is so segregated from the rest of Kirkwood. We don't learn about the achievement gap in the classroom. Instead, we ignore these topics. We hide them away in a box at the back of our closet so they never see the light of day. Now is the time to pull that box out of our closet. Blow off the dust. Open the box and get down to business.

We "talk" about race in school and in the workplace, but we only talk. After these discussions, we go home, we think about what we talked about, then we forget. We talk so much

that we never take action. Visiting Normandy was a great opportunity, but one visit once a year doesn't make change. The visit provoked thought, but no real change. If we're serious about fostering human rights in Kirkwood so every person regardless of the pigment of their skin can feel safe, we need to act. We need to use the resources we have in Kirkwood, educate ourselves, and make an effort. When we put in effort towards real change, changes will come. Our youth in Kirkwood are the gateway to real change. A youth committee working with the Human Rights Commission could shake up our suburbia.

Specifically focusing on the educational gap in our community, a youth committee has a better capability to invent new ideas for closing the gap because we're in school. As students, we see the racial divide in school firsthand, whereas adults (even those in our school) see the divide through a looking glass. We're more inclined to make an effort at change if we're instigating this change. If started, this committee could involve students from several different schools, which would not only engage a wider range of perspectives, but would help unite the community as a whole. Tackling the education gap can't happen overnight. Changing hundreds of years of racial division can't happen overnight. Sparking a change, though, can. Maybe soon, when we look at each other we'll see a person before we see a category.

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City of Kirkwood

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Starting Small

Honorable
mention

How to Foster Human Rights in Kirkwood, MO

Kirkwood, Missouri, is not the poster-county for fostering human rights. As a student at Kirkwood High School, I notice breaches of human rights almost daily; I could spend hours listing the infractions I have witnessed. I see white male students using the n-word almost constantly to refer to their friends in the hallways, shouting the word as if unaware of the appalled looks other students give them. I see transgender students' rights being taken away as their dead name (the birth name they no longer identify with) is displayed on school servers such as eBackpack and KDocs, as well as having their dead name called out on roll call whenever there is a substitute teacher. I see teachers refusing to use correct pronouns or names for said trans students. I see teachers making sexist remarks against women and I see teachers treating male students differently than female students; I once had a teacher who would scoff whenever a female student asked a question but would delve into detailed explanations whenever a male student asked a question. I see teachers being insensitive to students with mental illnesses, dismissing them as "lazy." The signs are subtle, but I am not the only one who notices them. I have had countless conversations with minority students who feel belittled or disregarded in the classroom.

I moved to Kirkwood when I was in fourth grade; I was set to be in Mrs. Laubert's class at Keysor Elementary. One of the first things I noticed about the school was how clique-y it was-- my mother sent an email out to all the parents of the kids in my class asking if she could carpool with one of them to Jefferson City during the grade-wide field trip, and only one man replied to her, confirming she could ride with him. The kids, likewise, didn't want me to sit at their lunch tables, didn't want me to play four-square with them, and didn't want to interact with me at all. I was the "weird" new kid who had a lisp so terrible she needed to repeat herself

upwards of three times before someone either understood her or just pretended they did so she would stop talking to them. Even in fourth grade, children were unaccepting of people who may be different than them-- and we need to change this, because children who discriminate will grow into adults who discriminate.

To foster human rights, one must start small. One must start with children. To create a more just community, Kirkwood must first create more just children who understand not only racial divides, but other social divides such as gender, sexual orientation, and religion. The stigma with not wanting to confront children with these issues centers around the idea that doing so would seemingly rip away the veil people believe children wear which obscures the world. However, children do not wear a veil. Children *see* diversity. Children *see* skin color, they *see* gender, they *see* how some women kiss other women and some men kiss other men. They will see these things, yet they cannot form an opinion on these topics as no one will talk clearly to the kids about the topics. Children go into the world with a clean, open mind and their opinion is formed by their environment. Thusly, elementary schools must create an environment in which education about not only multiplication tables and the laws of motion are learned, but social differences. As the old saying goes, one cannot teach an old dog new tricks-- so teach the dog the trick while it's still a pup and it'll carry that knowledge with it all it's life. Children are the perfect starting point because children don't discriminate. Why? Because discrimination is taught. Let me reiterate: discrimination is *taught*. Racism is taught, sexism is taught, transphobia is taught, homophobia is taught. Taught, as in humans do not inherently hate one another. No one human is born with the notion they are more than any other. Young children, though ignorant, truly represent the best of human nature. No child still in the innocent throes of childhood would

treat anyone different due to any aspect of their character. Children who have yet to be corrupted by media, family, environment, or society would consider the notion of hating someone based on physical or characteristic traits repugnant and ridiculous. Children *see* the differences between us; they are aware we are not all the same. They see the differences between humans but they do not care, and they do not let diversity affect how they treat someone unless someone teaches them to.

Children are not, contrary to popular belief, color blind; children see race, just as they see gender or hair color. Seeing race, however, is not the issue; the issue is the biases in our society which surround racial stereotypes. As Professor Brigitte Vittrup, an assistant professor at Texas Women's University, put it: “we have no communication about [race with children], and there are biases out there, then that's what children pick up on. And then they keep it with them for the rest of their lives” (“Can Babies Be...”). Racial biases are prevalent in many aspects of life which children come in contact with. Mary Whitfield, an early childhood educator, pointed out how “in *The Lion King*, the hyenas clearly speak in a kind of street, inner city African American dialect and are considered the bad guys” (Whitfield). Race is a clear division in our society, and children pick up on the divide-- however, Professor Vittrup asserts with communication about what race exactly means, children can accept different races and grow up to not believe in negative stereotypes. Vittrup says “there's a lot that parents and teachers and educators can do to start early on and just really teach children that we need to grow up and respect each other regardless of... race,... religion,... culture,... and physical abilities... [and] that's a very important message to send very early on” (“Can Babies Be...”). If children are taught from an early age to accept diversity, then they will grow up to not see differences as inhibiting factors in someone's

character. In Kirkwood, this job would fall on the elementary school teachers at schools such as Keysor, Tillman, Robinson, Westchester, and North Glendale.

Kirkwood will not win any medals for fostering human rights any time soon; we still have a long way to go. We still *need* a Human Rights Commission. We have been getting better, but in order to make a long-lasting effect on our community we must inform our children of different types of minority groups and try to instill positive thoughts about diversity before children are subject to the biases present in both media and their everyday lives. The real solutions to fostering human rights come in small packages, and they conveniently congregate from 8:40am to 3:33pm every weekday.

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Haley Bokern 5

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Works Cited

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