



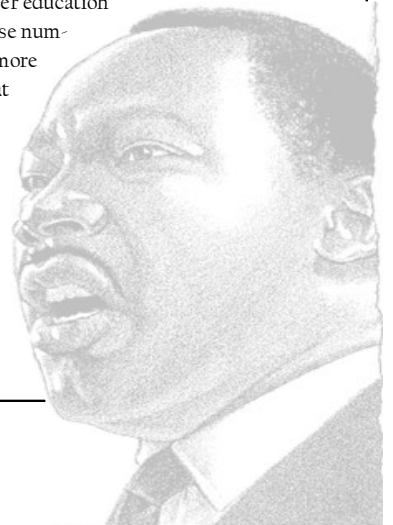
# 2015 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Art, Writing & Multimedia Contest

Leah Amon Toney (12th Grade)  
Shaker Heights High School  
Principal. Michael Griffith  
Teacher, Natalie Sekicky

"Ignorance is bliss," says Thomas Gray. This phrase has been used countless times in common literature and speech. What makes this phrase so enticing? The phrase is essentially stating its best not to know the whole truth all the time because of the content it may have. It works as a protection mechanism for the heart. If something is too terrible to know we can conceal it. This concealment is therefore "bliss". Concealment is also another word for hiding. When things are hidden people become curious; what is the whole truth? Not understanding something entirely creates holes which are usually filled with falsehoods. These falsehoods can become stereotypes. Stereotypes are a part of everyday life; they only become dangerous when they are broadcasted. The way African Americans are represented on television has an extreme effect on the way we are viewed as a race as well as our later success and behaviors.

Ralph Ellison once so greatly pointed out, "Movies are not about Blacks, but what Whites think about Blacks." He is correct. Black directors only make up four percent of the Directors Guild of America and of the 839 writers employed on prime-time television dramas and comedies, only 6.6% are black. This means White Americans are directing and writing shows depicting the African American community and its culture. Just how are we portrayed in the media? African Americans play a common role as the violent criminal, the mischievous paramour, or the lazy quick schemer. Think about it, whenever watching the news if there is a murder or an act of violence it is most times done by a Black man. Do White males not commit crimes? They do, but it is at the discretion of the news network to illustrate that. If they don't want to show it, they won't or they don't. Through television without even realizing it, stereotypes are catapulted into our minds forming an image of African Americans that may have never been there before. For the lazy schemer, "Sanford and Son" is a perfect example. Fred Sanford is a lazy old man who allows his son to do the hard work, while he lounges around. Not only that, he refuses to see him leave and make a life of his own, and manipulates him with heart attack cries and pleas to his deceased wife. How are Black people represented here? We are lazy, insensitive and manipulating. For the mischievous paramour, we can look at "Being Mary Jane" starring Gabrielle Union or "Scandal" starring Kerry Washington. Ms. Union is shown as a scandalous mistress who, although is successful in the business world, has terrible morals. The show Scandal has the show's intent in the title. Ms. Washington's character is nothing, if not a scandal. What does this say about Black people? We are untrustworthy with no ethics or care for others.

African Americans are constantly receiving demeaning roles as White Americans are held to a higher standard. One did not see Elizabeth Taylor in the same role as Gabrielle Union or Kerry Washington. Elizabeth was Cleopatra, a pharaoh of one of the greatest empires the world has known. This role was originally considered for Dorothy Dandridge but was given to Ms. Taylor, so it would be more critically acclaimed. The film was "white washed", a slang term used to describe stopping people from discovering the true facts about something. Ignorance is bliss right? White washing happens frequently in Hollywood where Black actors are cheated out of powerful, stirring roles. Instead of being the Kings and Queens, we are the servants and slaves as seen in the new movie "Exodus: Gods and Kings". Is it not time for Blacks to be represented in a way that is not average at best? The way a person views themselves is the way they will, in most cases perform. Do we want the next generation to be the stereotypes employed? Maybe we can't fix the media but we can fix what we tolerate. Things can change when we stand up. The passive route will not work. African Americans have been terribly represented since the Birth of a nation of 1915! It won't end any time soon. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spent his adult life working toward the achievement of his dream. The sad part is that Dr. King's dream asked for basic rights and privileges. I ask for the same. Why should I not be able to turn on my television and see a commanding Black role model? Or go to a movie where there is a triumphant Black hero who does not fit the issued stereotype? I deserve to see an example of class and dignity that so many members of my race have. I plan to help this problem go away by first explaining that ignorance is not bliss! Is life blissful for most African Americans right now? The answer is no. There are more African American males under the jurisdiction of a federal, state, or local penal system (791,600) than are enrolled in higher education (603,032). What is being created is a race of failures not notable members of society. Does anyone care? I do. I want these numbers to change. I want to see more African Americans in the White House, more African Americans in the school house, more African Americans doing more than selling drugs and going to jail. I don't want to see any more young black men dying at the hands of a police officer, or worst at the hands of each other! We can do more. We can push ourselves to do better. We cannot depend on the media to begin portraying us positively because green has always been the new Black. There needs to be a new, new Black. So, don't spend money on these white washed movies and especially do not live up to the stereotypes that we see every day. I can pledge to live by my words; I pledge to uncover the concealed truth that is Black life. I will not fall victim to the way society views my people because society is wrong. I am not mischievous, violent, or lazy. I am hard-working, respectful driven, and completely aware. I will not let the media tell me who I am. I will not let the media tell my people who we are. African Americans are an intelligent, ambitious, and preserving people and it is time to see that on television. No longer should blacks have to be downgraded to over-sexualized or violent roles. No longer should the labels created by others prevail. We know who we are; we live our lives every day and see who we are. We are not a showcase, but an inspiration. We are a powerful people with a powerful voice. I have a dream!



*"I Have A Dream"*