



2017 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Art, Writing, & Multimedia Contest

Our Divided Cafeteria

"Don't sit in the lower cafeteria."

Warnings rang clear from my first day in high school. White students primarily ate upstairs, camped out in the middle of the "cool" cafeteria, and black students took up surrounding areas. Scenes from the pre-Civil-Rights era flashed through my mind. On the staircase, people scrambled to mark their lunchroom territories, and I stood – an Asian-American with friendships dispersed – frozen between polarized stampedes.

"What are you? Where are you from?" Years ago, these seemingly innocent questions from both friends and strangers provoked unseen contempt in me. I longed to retort, "I belong here, too!" but suppressed my anger for peace. Our Shaker Heights community prided itself in its diversity, but this facade of cultural understanding quickly became its greatest flaw. Shaker was the tragic hero of integration.

As the lunchroom divide worsened, I could no longer stand idly by. I knew, voice is power – whether through the resonance of a forte in music, or through my forte of activism in leadership. I had previously gained experience hosting discussions on discrimination and polarization through Student Group on Race Relations (SGORR), but rather than keeping the conversation broad and indirect, I yearned to more candidly address the evident and prevalent racism. I wanted to promote greater change in our community's integration and advocate for more open discussion.

Dedicated to these goals, I gradually implemented new SGORR curriculum into my high school environment. I brought together excited high school students, administration, parents, and teachers through race-relations awareness activity days and "Diversity Discussions" forums. Beginning as a trial run, but quickly developing into a full-scale machine with other SGORR leaders, the high school SGORR days fostered open conversations for all voices to be heard and understood, encouraging more emphasis on discussing privilege, prejudice, and global affairs in our curriculum. I can still picture the half concerned, half surprised looks on my peers' faces as they began to understand the differences between "covert racism" and "overt racism."

As Shaker students, many of us were raised in a bubble of open-mindedness, which loosely meant "acceptance without challenge." When I began to more actively listen to others' perspectives and follow world news, I awakened from my passive race-relations slumber; I realized that open-mindedness does not mean accepting and agreeing with others' opinions, but rather developing one's own perspective yet still allowing others to question it.

By facilitating numerous community events to reduce discrimination, expanding SGORR in communities across the nation, and collaborating with Shaker's political and minority clubs, we are gradually repairing the dynamic of our cafeteria and community. On a personal level, I continue to challenge my own perspective of the world and pursue my love of discovery and inquiry, through classes on philosophy and sociology at Case Western Reserve University and my public health internship on Cleveland's racial violence epidemic. Now, I think more deeply about how to interrogate issues from many different angles.

My ventures in human relations instilled trust in myself to take risks in what I love; this willingness to follow through with my passions is what defines me, and everything I do.

I am unafraid to self-reflect and pursue the necessary conversations in sensitive and intertwined topics to arrive at better community solutions. I am not shaken by the discomfort that is inherent in questions without black-and-white answers. And, I am ready to take hold of the many opportunities in my near future – to continue to think and work through morally unsound situations, be surrounded by bright and equally passionate peers, learn from inspiring professors, and realize my future contributions of knowledge and activism in efforts to shape the world.

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Driving out Hate

